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Saul Bellow and the Evolution of the American Masculine Experience

*A Study on *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day**

Laetitia Huguet

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The University of Edinburgh
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Declaration

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by myself and is entirely my own work unless otherwise stated. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Lay Summary

The following thesis studies the philosophical and sociological background of three novels written by Saul Bellow between 1944 and 1956, namely *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, and *Seize the Day*. During this period, the place of the individual in society changed rapidly and this created tension between the social organisation in place and individuals who struggled to find their place in society. The focus on individuality in Saul Bellow's early novels has led to the consensus that the author conveys ideas which relate to the philosophical current of Existentialism.¹

This association has shadowed other aspects of these three novels such as their sociological relevancy. The purpose of this thesis is to expand upon the existentialist focus present in most criticism in order to demonstrate the sociological evolution of the American masculine experience. In turn, this aims to highlight the shift from a traditional image of masculinity based on heroism, personal ambition, and restrictive emotionality to a masculine identity more inclined to question its perception of itself and the world. To do so, it relates each novel to influential studies conducted at the time to offer an evolutionary perspective of the American masculine identity within that particular time-frame. For each novel, it exposes the male protagonist's struggles with social organisation to offer a valuable insight in the treatment and evolution of the masculine identity in Saul Bellow's early novels. Altogether, this thesis aims to develop connections between Saul Bellow's fiction and the historical challenges faced by American males in urban America.

¹ The term Existentialism is an umbrella term which applies to the work of various philosophers during the late 19th and the 20th centuries. This philosophy focuses on the individual and its place in the world based on the human abilities to experience the world internally and externally. The main issues discussed in that context are the obsession to live one's life to the best of one's abilities, the absurdity felt when one discovers that life is complicated and meaningless, the freedom of will and the necessity to act to forge one's identity.

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1. Introduction

“Was I a good man or a jerk?”
Saul Bellow on his deathbed

“How should a good man live; what ought he to do?”
Dangling Man

Saul Bellow is a major American writer who wrote prolifically throughout the twentieth century. In the following thesis, I present a comparative study of three carefully selected novels. I will analyse in turn Bellow's first two novels *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947) as well as his fourth novel *Seize the Day* (1956). To this day, the general consensus remains that *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* should be approached as postwar Jewish American novels representative of American existentialist fiction for “their moral preoccupations [and] the concentration on the burden and ambivalence of assuming personal responsibility in a world which accommodates evil” (Baumbach 101). What I aim to demonstrate is that the existentialist approach to Saul Bellow's early novels is reductionist in its systematisation of negative outcomes and the focus on the individualisation of despair and alienation. If the existentialist repertoire provides a valid framework in the analysis of the existential crisis which afflicts Joseph in *Dangling Man* and Leventhal in *The Victim* the repertoire should be approached as intricately entwined with other contemporary cultural markers which extend beyond the individualist focus of existentialist philosophy.

In order to conduct this argument, I have chosen to relate *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* to *Seize the Day*, another novel which features an alienated urban male. *Seize the Day* is a key text when approaching the existential repertoire in Bellovian fiction for after *The Adventures of Augie March*, his third novel of picaresque sensibility, Bellow returns to his original episodic format and once again explores the limitation of individual agency in the face of normative social forces. Like Joseph and Leventhal before him, Wilhelm struggles

with his identity and suffers from an irrational fear of ill-association and an inability to adapt to modern life. Additionally, whilst the systematic absence of women and particularly of each protagonist's wife plays a crucial role in the personal crisis which afflicts Joseph, Leventhal, and Wilhelm, their struggle to conform to any social organisations suggests a correlation between their existential crisis and the evolution of social expectations regarding gender role and masculine representation. By analysing the development of individual concerns in each of the three novels in light of the evolution of the American urban social organisation depicted in each of the novels and their contemporary cultural markers, this thesis aims to demonstrate that beyond its concern with the individual, Bellow's episodic postwar fiction offers a unique insight in the socio-cultural evolution of the American masculine experience between 1944 and 1956.

The first contextual part focuses on the concern with identity and individuality in each of the three novels and how this justifies an association with Existentialism. The second part focuses on the role of women and on the crucial role their absence plays in each of the novels respectively. Together these chapters establish the connection between each of the novels and justify their association in the in-depth analysis that follows. The core analysis focuses on each of the novels individually before highlighting how their portrayal of infantile, narcissistic men reflect the lack of evolution in masculine identity at the time despite a rapid evolution of the social vision of masculinity from soldier-hero to domestic husband and father. The lack of development in the portrayal of the male protagonists inscribes their characterisation in a larger sociological concern with the representation of gender role and masculinity in urban settings in particular. In this context, the role of women and the existentialist repertoire are closely entwined to illustrate the paralysis of the evolution of masculine identity in all of the three novels. Altogether, this analysis considers on the one hand the devaluation of individuality in the postwar sociological context and on the other, the cultural nihilism that the assimilation of the individual to the corporate world

seems to increasingly demand. Altogether it highlights the denigration of the individual in favour of a new social order in which existence has no personal meaning and relies entirely on mass-affiliation.

Bellow's ability to portray the difficulties beyond morality, choice, freedom and human responsibilities has resulted in a rather restricted interpretation of his early fiction. His first two novels have particularly suffered from a poorly researched association with French existentialism – “a detailed analysis of what specifically related these works to French existentialism was often left out completely” (Codde 123). From early critics such as Kazin and Lehan, to Clayton's unsuccessful attempt to differentiate *Dangling Man* from Sartre's *Nausea* – “It seems especially strange that Bellow, a defender of Man against writers of alienation and the void, should create in *Dangling Man* a novel so close in form and spirit to that classic novel of alienation and the absurdity of existence, Sartre's *Nausea*.” (57) – Bellow's early association with the negativity of existentialism has become a “critical cliché” (Codde 123). Based on a vague similarity in plot – “the protagonist is leading a regular life of automatisms ... until the bottom suddenly drops out by some unexpected event and he is thrown into complete uncertainty” (Codde 126), the correlation is certainly weak enough to explain critical confusion. What remains of such vague interpretations is the reductionist consensus that “*The Victim* was as prophetic of postwar fiction as *Dangling Man*. It helped shift fiction from the social subject to the private subject, from naturalism to themes of personal growth and identity.” (Dickstein 147) What it fails to do, however, is to recognise the importance of the social subject in both novels yet as this thesis will demonstrate that the social and the personal themes are not mutually exclusive in Bellovian fiction.

In *Dangling Man*, Joseph is tangled in bureaucratic strings and in spite of his social isolation, he finds himself at the heart of a social conundrum for he is neither American nor European and as a result, cannot engaged in a war which nevertheless affects him. If Joseph undertakes a personal transformation, it is not strictly nihilistic for his situation primarily

reflects the ambiguity of his social status. Consequently, Joseph challenges the possibility of extracting himself from the world entirely only to realise that his fate is merely a by-product of social organisation and unavoidable to say the least.

The world comes after you. It presents you with a gun or a mechanic's tool, it singles you out for this part or that, bring you ringing news of disasters and victories, shunts you back and forth, abridges, your rights, cuts off your future, is clumsy or crafty, oppressive, treacherous, murderous, black, whorish, venal, inadvertently naïve or funny. Whatever you do, you cannot dismiss it. (*Dangling Man* 100)

From the moment his induction is postponed, Joseph is confronted by a moral choice – to remain in a state of isolated despair or to choose to surrender. Despite its gloominess, the decision withholds allegorically at least the inescapable fact that human existence is intrinsically linked to “the world [that comes after you]” (100).

Similarly, in *The Victim*, Leventhal (who continuously attempts to dispute his involvement in events) finds himself unable to remain completely impassive.

You couldn't find a place in your feeling for everything. ... On the other hand, if you shut yourself up, not wanting to be bothered, then you were like a bear in a winter hole, or like a mirror wrapped in a piece of flannel. And like such a mirror you were in less danger of being broken, but you didn't flash either. But you had to flash. (*Victim* 83)

Constantly torn between a refusal for agency – “the prospect of interfering ... was repugnant to him” (*Victim* 43) and a desire to stand out and “to flash” – that is to be socially recognised and included, Leventhal becomes a victim of his own indecision. Unwilling to admit responsibility for his actions, Leventhal attempts to live without agency until his objectification by Allbee leaves him “filled with dread” (*Victim* 26) and forced to recognise his true social status. Thus, if the focus seems to be primarily on personal transformation, in both *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, the male protagonists' fate is systematically connected to their social status and their willingness to maintain it.

The consensus was, however, that “1944 [the year of *Dangling Man*'s publication] was a tragic year world-wide, especially if you were Jewish, and to assume a depressive

literary posture was not to do more than take note of what was going on” (Kerbel 6). Yet, *Dangling Man* and three years later *The Victim* surpass the “depressive literary posture” to voice the feeling of alienation which particularly affected masculine identity at the time. In *Dangling Man*, Joseph not only suffers from a feeling of displacement, “a feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world” (*Dangling* 17), he is also disconnected from the faith of both the European Jews and the American soldiers – “I have lived here eighteen years, but I am still Canadian, a British subject, ... a friendly alien” (2). Unemployed, isolated, and constantly rejected by the army, Joseph fails to identify himself with the heroism at the heart of the American masculine identity at the time. This feeling of misplacement, of lacking in identity is equally present in Leventhal who strongly believes in his own fraudulent nature – “revealing [with] his deepest feelings, ‘I was lucky. I got away with it’” (*Victim* 15). Leventhal, who has achieved financial success nevertheless fails to recognise his affiliation with the American masculine experience and doubt his own achievement as a result.

As such, their respective feeling of displacement is paired with a feeling of powerlessness which ultimately victimises them by challenging their sense of identity. This leads to feelings of despair towards their inability to maintain their sense of self which in turn reinforces “a guilt consciousness of emotional inadequacy or impotence” (*Adds* 156) which makes them doubt their masculinity. As their existential crisis unfolds, both men experience a sense of “alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat.” (Barrett 36) Their agency is challenged and demands an evolution of character in order for them to adapt to their circumstances. Joseph and Leventhal, however, seem unable to overcome their paralysis and ultimately repress their identity in hope of an assimilation to the social organisation in place.

Since their publications, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* have been associated with French Existentialism, a critical stand which Bellow did not wish to corroborate and actually refused to encourage by attempting to create with *The Adventures of Augie March* a completely new type of novel which would free his fiction “from measures devised and applied by others” (Addis 236). However, it nevertheless remains that Bellow found himself amongst the first Americans to return to Paris in 1948 where he initially continued to question “the human essences neglected and forgotten by a distracted world” (Addis 169). At the time, Bellow was working on *The Crab and the Butterfly* of which only an adapted short story remains today, namely *The Trip to Galena*.

Published in 1950, *The Trip to Galena* features a monologue of madness questioning amidst trivialities murder and genocide and the deep feeling of alienation emanating from an unbearable sense of sadness. Far from distancing Bellow from the gloominess of his earlier work, this story echoes the madness of Nietzsche's Zarathustra in 1883 and the significance of the Death of God in a world governed by evil forces. Afflicted with madness, the speaker questions the unfathomable reality of murder and as such projects Bellow further into the existentialist thematic and its obsession with the morality of human freedom and responsibilities.

Motivated by a desire to escape categorisation, Bellow eventually comes to a realisation and abandons the Existential trajectory. Wandering the streets of Paris in 1949, moments away from concluding *The Crab and the Butterfly*, Bellow experiences a rebirth which will redirect his writings – the epiphany that would lead to his first critically acclaimed novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*.² Bellow fondly remembers the moment in Paris in the spring of 1949, when he saw street-cleaners washing down the pavements with water from open hydrants:

I suppose a psychiatrist would say that this was some kind of

² *The Adventures of Augie March* received the 1954 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction

hydrotherapy — the flowing water freeing me from the caked burden of depression that had formed on my soul . . . I remember saying to myself, ‘Well, why not . . . have at least as much freedom of movement as this running water. (Bellow qtd in Leader ch.9)

The running water triggers a creative liberation in Bellow. It washes away the gloom of his early days and with it the dust of his forefathers and the weight of the Old World. Anxious to share his revelation, Bellow shamelessly adopts the exuberance and upbeat tempo of the American hero. Unapologetic, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) opens with a redefining statement, a call for identity: “I am an American, Chicago born” (*Augie* 3). “In its rumbling free-style structure, it is bumptiously American, resembling in its high-spirits, its vivid adventures, its larger-than-life characters, a Huckleberry Finn in Chicago ... *Augie March* was a classical conversion book. (Schechner 6) With *Augie March*, Bellow foregoes his unfortunate association with French existentialism and claims his roots in the American novel – or so it seemed at least.

Abandoning the episodic nature of his earlier novels, Bellow portrays Augie March from boyhood to adulthood. In true picaresque fashion, Augie uses his wit to find his path in life – his education is mainly autodidactic as he never truly follows through with the standard education system. Adventurous at heart, he goes with the flow and finds his way as encounters dictate. Unburdened by the fear of failure or by a guilt-ridden consciousness, Augie chases self-exploration and identity with the candid perkiness of a true American protagonist. With a sense of agency and a capacity for resilience, Augie accepts and moves on whilst Joseph and Leventhal fuel a lack of personal drive with an inability to handle freedom and to accept difficulties. If Bellow seems with *Augie March* to have abandoned his former gloominess to portray a flamboyant young man who creates his own path, the undertone of the narrative nevertheless remains existentialist in its concern with notions of identity and its quest for authentic living. Already diminished by these similarities in thematic, the conversion represents an oddity in Bellow's work rather than a rebirth as his

next novel, *Seize the Day* will demonstrate.

In 1956, just a few years after the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow returns to an episodic narrative with *Seize the Day*. Like *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, the narrative centred around a life-altering moment which sends its subject in a downward spiral of self-doubt and awkward, morally biased, choices. The time line is even more constricted for Tommy Wilhelm as his fall from “the twenty-third floor” (*Seize* 3) of an upper-class residential hotel in New York to a “funeral parlor ... where he had hidden himself in the center of a crowd by the great and happy oblivion of tears.” (*Seize* 116-8) occurs within the course of one day. Although Wilhelm deliberately left his wife and children, their absence together with his wife's demands precipitate his downfall. The absence of the feminine together with Wilhelm's struggles with the American masculine experience reflect on the rise of the middle class in America and its alienating effect on the individual man and as such reinvestigate earlier existentialist thematic found in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*.

Furthermore, in light of *White Collar* – a sociological study of the American middle-class published in 1951, *Seize the Day* approaches “the personality market ... in a society of employees, dominated by the marketing mentality” (Mills 182) and Wilhelm (with his penchant for romanticisation) does not identify with his environment. Constantly exposed to the complexity of modern life, Wilhelm lives in a constant state of doubt and confusion. His identity crisis and his feeble personal goals reflect the objectification of men in corporate America. “There is a curious contradiction about the ethos of success in America today. On the one hand, there are still compulsions to struggle, to 'amount to something'; on the other, there is poverty of desire, a souring of the image of success.” (Mills 285) Or as Bellow later puts it: “More and more public themes, with less and less personal consciousness. Clearly personal consciousness is shrinking.” (*Adds* 160) Wilhelm who constantly alters his personality to fit in any given social organisation and desires wealth without effort represents

the loss of identity which afflicts the modern urban male.

The effect of social environments on identity is a recurrent theme in Bellow's fiction. Human values are scrutinised under the light of cultural phenomena to reveal the potential for alterations that such phenomena have on the American masculine experience. In light of Wilhelm's powerlessness, the buoyancy of Augie March becomes an oddity of comical value which suggests a short-lived shift from the bleakness of earlier novels to an American endless optimism and faith in the future.

Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop at this line of endeavor. Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America. (*Augie March* 536).

The staggering optimism of Augie March who even at risk of being “a flop” still believes in endless opportunities spreading “out in every gaze” clashes with Wilhelm who “sank deeper than sorrow, through torn sobs and cries toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need.” (*Seize* 118) This change of thematic from endless optimism and possibilities to the drowning of a man washed down by waves after waves of cultural wasteland reinstates the earlier concerns with the struggle of the modern urban male with identity. As such, *Seize the Day* echoes the despair described in *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* and adds to it the loss of individuality brought forth by the corporate world. Thus, if in the 1940s, the struggle with identity emerges from the bleakness of war, the quest for masculine heroism, and the fear of social eviction, in the 1950s, the American urban male succumbs to the sirens of mass media and corporate elitism and as this thesis will demonstrate when read together these three novels offer a fantastic account of the evolution of the American masculine experience.

2. The Concern with Identity and Masculinity in *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, and *Seize the Day*.

In the decade during which these three novels were published, the American masculine identity undertook important changes which are in turn reflected in the concerns regarding masculine experience at the heart of all three novels. To understand this evolution, it is necessary to identify the similarities between *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* to then demonstrate their correlation with *Seize the Day*. Altogether, this interpretation aims to expose the cultural evolution of the American masculine experience and its effect on masculine agency, individuality and freedom. Reading the three novels together not only offers a unique perspective on the American urban male and his place in the world in Bellocian fiction, it also allows us to reinterpret Bellow's association with French Existentialism within an American context, thus limiting the reductionist viewpoint of early criticism. In order to complete this particular reading I have chosen to focus on the evolution of cultural markers between *Seize the Day*, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*.

As the three narratives follow the existentialist model in which “the protagonist is leading a regular life of automatism (which the existentialists identify as the primary means to ward off existential angst), until the bottom suddenly drops out by some unexpected event and he is thrown into complete uncertainty” (Codde 126), the comparison between the three main protagonists is reinforced by the similarities in the narrative scheme. Indeed, as a trio, these novels offer an enlightened portrait of different agendas of individual men who are all struggling with their agency and the limitations caused by their deeply anxious nature. “Bellow rejects the denigration of the ordinary life of the individual and tries to show in his fiction the possibilities for finding meaning in such lives.” (Clayton 24). Furthermore, the portrayal of these individual men parallels the evolution of external influences and the rapid changes in the modern capitalist society which they all inhabit. As a result, by creating

vulnerable men who experience the isolating effect of alienation within an urban society, Bellow opposes the cult of the masses and questions the absurdity of existence to create a new vision of the American man which demonstrates a deep concern for the preservation of individuality.

The concern for individuality further unifies the three novels by offering a vast range of details on the inner life of each protagonist. Each novel reflects on the struggles of an individual who does not identify with his position and concerns himself with his sense of individuality as a result. The sudden disruption in their respective routine triggers a feeling of alienation and an inability to face the unfolding events without them impacting on their sense of self. Overall, their inability to face their social reality constantly shapes their existence and as their routine is disturbed so is their sense of self.

Thus, in *Dangling Man*, Joseph who once dreamt of a “a colony of the spirit” (24), and opposes “the code of the athlete” (1) remains a “friendly alien” (*Dangling Man* 3) despite a willingness to partake in military life. Unable to assimilate to the American way of life as successfully as his “wealthy” “alive to his duties” and “patriot” brother Amos (*Dangling Man* 41-2), Joseph is misunderstood by his family. Prior to his decision to join the army, Joseph fails to engage with the possibilities of his own world – marrying Iva instead of a “wealthy woman” as his well-adapted brother did and refusing a “position he [Amos] offered” in his successful business (40). Furthermore, once his dangling begins and liberates him from the constraints of a mundane daily life, Joseph who “has not stopped to think of himself as a scholar” proves unable to sustain “a sense of his own being ... [to] give all his attention to defending his inner differences” (15-6). Alone in a room, Joseph has left an androcentric community – his comrades with whom he argues “the fate of the European Man” (*Dangling Man* 19) and resents Iva who is now the breadwinner and abhors his homely lifestyle. Eventually, a deep sense of alienation forces him to act and in desperation, Joseph gives himself up to another androcentric community by requesting his immediate

induction. His incapacity to maintain his identity outside of a standard social organisation highlights the public nature of the American masculine identity.

In *The Victim*, Leventhal suffers from a similar faith. Despite his relative professional success and a brief social position in Baltimore, he proves equally unable to sustain his identity. From maintaining “a kind of alien, sceptical interest” during his social outings to being unsure of his professional ability to the point of attributing his success to luck rather than hard work (*Victim* 14-5), Leventhal constantly doubts himself and his social position. Dependent on his wife to maintain a status quo in his life, he feels threatened, “his nerves unsteady” (20) after her departure. The appearance of Allbee in the narrative signals the beginning of his journey into alienation. At the mercy of others, Leventhal only escapes his existential crisis by requesting that his wife returns home. Leventhal who seeks social assimilation fails to recognise the value of his individuality and as a result becomes unable to recognise his agency in the world to the point that his character becomes entirely dependent on external circumstances.

Finally, in *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm suffers from an equally overwhelming distortion of his identity. Lured to California by the promise of stardom, Wilhelm later finds that his agent is a phony “under indictment for pandering” (24). Despite this unfortunate encounter, Wilhelm remains “a sucker for people who talk about the deeper things of life” (*Seize* 69) no matter how honestly they do so. Gullible, a poor judge of character and constantly ill at ease, Wilhelm fails to recognise his lack of personal drive. Unable to sustain a traditional lifestyle, he leaves his job, his wife and children behind and finds himself alienated from his own existence. Romanticising the past, Wilhelm longs for simpler time when every man spoke the same language. “In the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments ... all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. ... They were his brothers and his sisters.” (*Seize* 85) Yet he is unable to sustain this love of humanity in everyday life, “he

didn't feel anything like a brother toward the man who sold him tickets" (85) and he believes in his right to "be freed from the anxious and narrow life of the average" (23) thus distancing himself from his social context to the point of alienation. Altogether these three characters share an inability to conform to their environment paired with a hopeless romantic vision of life. They seek to be delivered from the burden of everyday life and their obstinacy leads to a denial of reality and a refusal to acknowledge facts in favour of an unobtainable ideal, be it a "colony of the spirit," (*Dangling Man* 24) or an easy escape from "the anxious and narrow life of the average." (*Seize* 23). If their lack of engagement with the world together with their antagonistic behaviour create a certain disassociation in their everyday life, it is only when their routine is disrupted that their existential crisis takes place.

In order to explore the individual characteristics of the three novels that I have chosen to analyse it is necessary to define their existential undertone in more detail. All three protagonists, Joseph, Leventhal, and Wilhelm face the dissolution of their social identity as they struggle with sudden changes in their lifestyle. That struggle triggers their alienation as it questions their very existence and its justification in a world no longer interested in the individual. Their quest for resolution "from an existential disorder of his [their] cultural perception to an assertion and reaffirmation of human values" (*Walden* 28) reflects on their desire to understand themselves within their social context. In all three novels, the existentialist emphasis appears through the constant questioning of individual existence and with it of the notions of freedom and choice necessary to define one's own meaning in life. However unlike "the 'authentic' existential hero who is portrayed in existentialist novels as a self-sufficient and autonomous subject – a subject who braves anxiety, who is harshly lucid to the bitter end and who tries above all to remain free and self-determining in the face of adversity" (Jopling 362) Joseph, Leventhal, and Wilhelm succumb to their lack of authenticity and abandon the pursuit of freedom and their accountability in favour of a regimented lifestyle. Existential authenticity is defined by a total and resolute engagement of

the self in every decision that one makes and thus primarily reflects “a philosophy of radical individualism” (Fulton 111).

In Bellow, however, the protagonists are not primarily individualist. On the contrary, their anguish and their sense of alienation have more to do with their cultural context and their desire to integrate with it successfully than with a profound desire to annihilate external influences on their characters. Their crisis is existential in the sense that they question their identity and the value of the individual within a pre-established social context. As such their crisis does not limit itself to their concern with individuality but rather questions the changes in the models of masculinity in American culture. Indeed, “the dissolution of formerly held notions of heroism and masculinity precipitated the formulation of new ideas about what it means to be an American man in America” (Adams 117) after WWII and the dramatic changes brought forth by postwar posterity “turned American minds to the creation of new images of heroic behaviors and manliness consistent with economic growth.” (Adams 117) This quest for an American masculine experience is consistent with new social organisations and reveals the underlying concerns in each of the novels with the social aspects of the existential crisis which afflicts the protagonists.

In that context, *Dangling Man* represents the burgeoning battle between the silent soldier-hero image of American masculinity which Hemingway formerly established and a new type of masculinity eloquently illustrated with Joseph's sentimentality and intellectual concerns with existence. The next chapter in *The Victim* follows in Leventhal a man who has lost all forms of heroism in favour of a passive attitude to life which condemns him to become a constant victim of external pressures. Finally, with *Seize the Day* Wilhelm struggles with “a new type of heroism which heavily relies on money, power, and prestige” (Adams 178) in which American masculinity becomes defined by the domestic sphere and the holy grail of the nuclear family. Consequently, if the struggle with identity shared by all three protagonists in their respective narrative mirrors existentialist concerns, it nevertheless

surpasses the strictly individual concern of existentialist literature to question the social implications of masculine alienation.

3. **Expressing the Feminine by Absentia**

In all three novels, the sudden absence of their wives triggers the crisis which disrupts each protagonists' routine to the point of non-return. The absence of women, or more precisely the absence of wives, in Bellow's fiction has often been interpreted as misogynistic rather than being approached as a binary opposition which allows one to explore the masculine paradigm within a given social context. From the simplistic view that "the whole of Bellow's work is singularly lacking a real or vivid female character" (Fielder 363) – as if their absence challenges the validity and relevance of their existence – to the ideas that "there is not a single woman in all of Saul Bellow's work whose active search for identity is viewed compassionately" (Austin 57) and that Bellow's archetypal woman is "the bitchy wife" (Goldman 73), Bellow's portrayal of women suffers from an ongoing reductionist interpretation which dismisses the cultural relevancy of women in his work while simultaneously reducing the impact of their absence. In fact, the consensus is that "one of the most persistent problems for feminist Bellow critics is that the author forces most of his female characters into stereotypically female spaces – thus confirming the arbitrary social distinctions that serve at the basis for all gender inequality." (Austin 66) If this simplistic and inaccurate analysis of Bellow's treatment of women is somewhat tamed in Goldman by the analysis of "the family as a fractured social unit" (65), the consensus nevertheless persists that Bellow conveys a strictly androcentric world-view in which women are essentially powerless.

This simplistic vision entirely dismisses the relevancy of such portrayal in light of the cultural and social structures in place at the time. After all, an androcentric world-view is hardly a novel idea in the American novel. "American novelists like Cooper and Melville and Hawthorne are more notable for cardboard creatures than breathing flesh" (Pinsker 131).

Furthermore, in an androcentric world-view as depicted in *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, and *Seize the Day*, it should not be surprising to find women lacking in vividness for they are portrayed through the male gaze whose point of view needless to say is not that of the author. Thus, not only is this approach simplistic and biased, it also disregards the social and cultural relevance of each of the narratives to sustain a misogynist interpretation of Bellowian fiction. Denouncing an anthropological author such as Bellow for his accurate depiction of “strictly female spaces” and “arbitrary social distinctions” (Austin) entirely disregards its cultural relevancy. Indeed, “Saul Bellow (as well as Henry James and William Faulkner are unique among major white male American novelists for perceiving, reacting to, apprehending, locating, and reinvigorating culture with their attempts at staging differences.” (Cronin 10) Several elements which will be discussed in depth later demonstrate this obsession to present a culturally up-to-date portrait of society from a realist standpoint which in turn offers a philosophical reflection on the period during which each novel was written.

From the discussion in *Dangling Man* on “the hardships of rationing” in a capitalistic society used to wealth inequity and to a vast array of “standard of living” (42) to the detailed depiction of cafeterias in *The Victim* and *Seize the Day* in a fashion that reflects the cultural evolution of public spaces, all three novels demonstrate a factual interest in society and its effect on human relationships. Thus, to reduce Bellowian fiction to an inability to offer convincing dramatically portrayed women actually disregards the vital role of these particular women in the narrative. In effect, rather than denouncing the reductionist portrayal of these women as a feminist issue, it offers far more insight to question the cultural and social reasons behind this particular choice of portrayal in absentia.

In questioning the relevancy of “the arbitrary social distinctions” (Austin 66) which delineate the narrative in each three novels, it becomes possible to retrace the evolution of these particular distinctions in time. Doing so clearly demonstrates that each of the women, namely Iva, Marie and Margaret has a central role in the life of their respective husband and

that their influence remains strong despite their physical absence. If Iva, Marie, and Margaret are indeed primarily identified by their status as subjugated wives, the reality of their position opposes the masculine gaze. In all three novels, the women prove their ability to maintain their sense of self despite the sudden changes in their daily life even when they are separated from their husbands. On the contrary, the husbands do not cope with the changes and do not accept their wives' agency. As a result, while the wives adapt to their changing routine and remain in charge of mundane aspects whilst doing so, the husbands prove unable to face reality and their identity collapses under the pressure.

In each novel, the wife demonstrates an ability to fulfil several roles and to juggle with the demands of a rapidly evolving social context. Iva who has become the sole breadwinner nevertheless returns “home after lunch to nurse me [Joseph]. She brought a box of Louisiana strawberries and, as a treat, rolled them in powdered sugar” (85) thus returning to a motherly role when circumstances demand it. In *The Victim*, Marie leaves home to look after a bereaved mother but keeps her wifely duties by sending a postcard with “intimate references on it” (see *The Victim* 17, 54). In doing so, she not only assumes a helpful role to adapt to the situation but also proves her ability to wear more than one hat without letting it affect her sense of identity. Finally, Margaret also promptly adapts to Wilhelm's departure and accepts the “bringing up of the children as her burden” (113) whilst Wilhelm denies responsibility. These examples highlight the multidimensionality of these women and with it, the inadequacy of a restrictive focus on gender binary in the reading of these novels.

Furthermore, these examples raise the question of power and agency in the matrimonial unity and the repercussion of the private sphere in the public one. It also emphasizes the husbands' lack of adaptability as well as their inability to resolve crises single-handedly. These crucial aspects are embedded in the narrative and convey important information about the true role and true power of each wife in their husband's life. Crucially, they emphasize the fact that despite reducing them to two-dimensional characters in the

narrative, their absence has a profound effect on the male protagonists and ultimately questions women's place within the framework of American life.

Despite the two-dimensional nature of Iva, Mary and Margaret throughout the narrative, their absence defines them more than their perceived duties as wives. Indeed, the apparent simplicity of portrayal is paradoxical for it simultaneously reinforces the extent of the female power over their men. Crucially, their absence does not remove them entirely from the narrative but rather highlights changes which heavily contribute to the masculine existential crisis that occurs in each novel. In *Dangling Man*, Iva becomes the sole breadwinner, a role which incommodes Joseph as it reverses his vision of gender role. In *The Victim*, Mary leaves for an undisclosed period of time thus creating a power struggle between her and Leventhal as both delay discussing a potential reunion. In *Seize the Day*, Margaret and Wilhelm are separated yet her needs are constantly prioritised at Wilhelm's expense. Thus, in each novel, the women retain, despite their absence, control over their marriage. If their identity is only revealed through the male gaze, it nevertheless appears that unlike the men, they retain their agency and freedom. Consequently, the mystery surrounding their persona contributes to highlighting their influence out with “stereotypically female spaces” (Austin 66) and rather than their absence being dismissed as a default setting made necessary by Bellow's inability to portray women as complex autonomous characters, one should consider it as a subtle yet effective way to approach gender politics. Without their women to maintain them afloat, Joseph, Leventhal and Wilhelm experience a feeling of displacement, of being fundamentally powerless in their respective cultural and social structures. As a result, if “the feminine is, in many essential ways, silenced and excluded” (Cronin 14) its relevance is not strictly limited by gender and therefore, influences the protagonists' relationship to the American masculine experience in ways that cannot be ignored.

The freedom associated with the absence of their wives systematically confronts the men with their responsibilities and forces them to regain agency in the world. If each wife is

sporadically present in the narrative, either physically, by recollection, or by various ways of communication, limitations are blurred as both their absence and their momentary presence highlight their multidimensionality and resourcefulness. Meanwhile, confronted by their own thoughts and feelings, the husbands are no longer sheltered from a nagging feeling of self-estrangement and as a result, lose control over their constructed identity. In *Dangling Man*, Iva is two-dimensional and appears in the narrative strictly as a part of the reported events in various entries of Joseph's journal. Her voice is never heard and her behaviour dissected by Joseph whose existential crisis influences his vision of life and challenges his perception of women in the process. Isolated and miserable, Joseph no longer corresponds to the image he previously had of himself and with it crumbles his vision of his wife. Convinced of his duties to educate his wife by shaping her opinions, Joseph loses all influence on Iva as she becomes the breadwinner while coping with more traditional feminine duties.

Eventually I learned that Iva could not live in my infatuations. ... Iva was formed at fifteen, when I met her, with likes and dislikes of her own which (because of some strange reason, I opposed them) she set aside until the time when she could defend or simply assert them.” (*Dangling Man* 70)

Whether or not, his “infatuations” ever influenced or shaped Iva's behaviour is not clear. Joseph believes that he “had dominated her for years; she was now capable of rebelling” (69). What Joseph identifies as a rebellion is nothing but Iva's ability to face challenges and adapt to new situations. Whilst Joseph doubts his core beliefs and worries about external opinions, Iva appears as a resourceful woman, able to maintain her household despite their unstable situation. She does not demand anything of Joseph, and she supports both of them financially. “She claims that it is no burden and that she wants me [him] to enjoy this liberty” (*Dangling Man* 3). Her income and her social position as a librarian offer her a sense of control over their shared life and her self-confidence increases as Joseph engulfs himself in silence. Several incidents throughout the narrative suggest that she frees herself from Joseph's authority and with it from the social expectations thus achieving the “highest 'ideal

construction' ... to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace.” (*Dangling* 114). Her ascension to personal freedom is subtle but nevertheless demonstrates a revolutionary attitude in disharmony with the conventional feminine ideal.

During a party, Iva “contemptuously” disregards Joseph's demands that she stops drinking although he “did not mean to be disobeyed.” (28) and blankly refuses to leave at his demands. “What for?” she said. ‘I don't want to go yet.’” (31). Later on, after Joseph several times refused his brother's money, Iva accepts “an envelope containing ... a check” from Joseph's mother (90). However, if her liberated behaviour exasperates him at the party where he “was irritated enough to consider, for a moment, striding up and snatching the glass away” (28), he barely reacts to her taking the money simply stating “whatever you like” (90). If Joseph's inspiration for his wife is undoubtedly influenced by his idealised version of femininity “inspired by Burckhardt's great ladies of the Renaissance and the no less profound Augustan women” (*Dangling Man* 70), his desire to shape her to these models diminishes as his existential crisis overtakes him. As his feminine ideal revolves around ideas of submission and control, his lack of agency and power render his fantasy unobtainable.

Attracted to a period during which women were subjected to male authority with no legal or public agency, Joseph fantasises of replicating a similar sense of control upon Iva. His primal desire is to subjugate and captivate his wife – for her to become a reflection of his ideas and a symbol of his success. Thus, he suffers from the role reversal which occurs as he dangles unable to retain his former identity. As Iva begins “to enjoy her independence” (*Dangling Man* 70) Joseph transfers his infatuations to Kitty whose situation reminds him of “the first two years of [his] marriage” (70). By maintaining a platonic relationship Joseph indulges in the very conversations he can no longer have with Iva who is “now capable of rebelling” (69). In contrast, “Kitty ... is not an intelligent or even clever girl” (68) – she however indulges Joseph's desire to subjugate women. The indulgence is however short-lived as Kitty eventually expresses her desire for him to leave Iva thus breaking the

subjugation and shattering Joseph's illusion of control further.

As a result, Kitty's rejection further aggravates Joseph's loss of agency by eliminating the last illusion of control in Joseph's life. His poverty has already annihilated his influence on his wife and on his niece Etta whom he attempted to save from vanity. "I had until lately tried to influence the girl, sending her books and, on her birthday, record albums. ... I was unsuccessful. My missionary eagerness betrayed itself too soon, before I had her confidence." (*Dangling Man* 41). Kitty's refusal to remain a mistress constitutes the final blow to Joseph's aspirations to control women and precipitates his surrender to the army. In contrast to Joseph's surrender, Iva once again successfully handles the situation. Joseph recognises that she has the ability to constantly adapt to circumstances "free from things She does not protest against this rooming-house life; she seems less taken up with clothes." (112) Despite the abandonment of things she once cherished, Iva is still capable of enjoying her life. She parties with friend, accepts dinner invitations as Joseph constantly avoids meeting with friends to avoid talking about his situation. She also organises a celebration for their "sixth wedding anniversary" which is ruined by Joseph witnessing a sudden death on the street and mentioning "nothing of this to Iva (see 83-4). This incident illustrates that despite sharing a physical space, there is an overwhelming sense of absence in their emotional and intellectual life. An absence which exacerbates if not triggers Joseph's identity crisis - "I am alone ten hours a day in a single room ... We no longer confide in each other; in fact, there are many things I could not mention to her." (*Dangling Man* 2-3). Isolated and unable to sustain his personality, Joseph's crisis increases as his wife liberates herself.

In *The Victim*, Leventhal's wife is physically absent during most of the narrative. "Mary had gone South for a few weeks to be with her mother." (*Victim* 8) Her absence lasts several weeks and although Leventhal expects "a letter from Mary" (54), their communication remains limited as his attempts to write back are systematically interrupted by Allbee. Mary nevertheless attempts to maintain a sense of intimacy with her husband by

sending revealing post cards, Leventhal who enjoys Mary's infatuation simultaneously finds her attitude too daring. "Instead of a letter, Mary had sent two post cards closely covered with writing. ... The second card was different; there was intimate references on it. Only Mary could write such things on cards for everyone in the world to read." (54) Their limited intimacy is further challenged when Joseph "writing with sudden emotion" later forgets to post the letter. "He had meant to send the night letter before coming up" as Allbee interrupts him forcing him to finish writing "abruptly with a few perfunctory sentences." (56) Allbee's arrival dissipates Leventhal's sentimentality and the letter to Mary is not mentioned again. Leventhal does not communicate with Mary until Mickey's condition worsens considerably to the point that "the father ought to be on hand ... It's showdown, in other words." (133) However, not only does Leventhal switch to notes – it finally "occurred to him to send a note to Mary" (133) – whereas he previously "wrote swiftly and exuberantly" (55) he now struggles to find the right words. He "wrote a few words, and stopped to consider what he ought or ought not to say. There was plenty to choose from." (133) Once again, he is interrupted by Allbee and the note is not mentioned again. If Mary is perfectly capable of maintaining her wifely role and identity despite having to care for her mother, Leventhal proves unable to focus his attention and systematically lets external disruptions decide of his actions.

Leventhal tolerates Allbee's interruption – "Leventhal felt inexplicably weak against him" (135) – and accepts Allbee's presence in his private sphere with mixed feelings of anger, guilt and fear until the situation escalates out of control. Returning home after a party, Leventhal finds himself locked out of his own apartment. With complete disregard for Leventhal and Mary's intimate space, Allbee desecrates the marital bed by bringing "a tramp in from the street." (230) Not only does the fact that Allbee has retained physical needs after his wife's death repulses Leventhal, the desecration of the marital bed represents a blow to Mary's allegorical association with virginity. Leventhal interprets Allbee's needs as a betrayal

of Allbee's deceased wife – “You hypocrite! I thought you couldn't get over your wife” (231) – and as an admission of guilt and responsibilities for his chaotic lifestyle. “Allbee and the woman, moved or swam toward him out of a depth of life in which he himself would be lost, choked, ended. There lay horror, evil, all that he had kept himself from.” (235) This episode associates Allbee with “the lost, the outcast, the overcome,” (16) the social pariah which Leventhal wishes to disassociate from. As such it finally gives him the authority to reject Allbee as a “dirty phoney” (232). Leventhal finally realises the incongruity of Allbee's initial demands. “The idea of an introduction to Shifcart lost all its substance; it was a makeshift demand, improvised. That he was able to see this gave Leventhal the feeling that he was becoming himself again after a long lapse.” (233) His fear of being associated with a social pariah causes Leventhal to finally ask his wife to come home. In his mind, she represents the safeguard against social downfall. Leventhal has “great faith in her ability to restore normalcy” (174), for her absence systematically marks Leventhal's descent into the very lifestyle he wishes to avoid.

Mary and Leventhal have already been separated in the past. This initial separation corresponds with Leventhal's ill-advised decision to quit Baltimore and a steady job in the public sector to relocate to New York without clear prospects. Unsuccessful, “Leventhal's face grew dark, more with self-condemnation than with resentment ... He began in a spirit of utter hopelessness” (*Victim* 14) until his eventual reunion with Mary. After their next separation, Leventhal similarly regains his identity once her return is confirmed for the very next day. “He had to attend to the flat; she had to find it as she had left it.” (237) Indeed, during her absence, Leventhal had barely looked after himself, let alone the flat. From eating in a cheap basement restaurant with a “damp woody smell” serving food in “blackened enamel dish” (17) to dealing with unsteady nerves (see 20) and being unable to keep his flat tidy – “within a few days the flat had become dirty” (174) –, Leventhal does not look after himself properly. His dependency on Mary controls every aspect of his life. Without her

presence, Leventhal, as Joseph in *Dangling Man*, finds himself unable to cope with mundane tasks on the one hand and with his own existence on the other.

Despite his clear lack of agency, Leventhal also fantasises on feminine submission. After his phone call to his wife, he believes that she was waiting for him to summon her back. “From the way she spoke, he realized that she had been waiting for him to make this call. When he said, 'Can you come soon?' she replied, 'Tomorrow,' with an eagerness that astonished him.” (*Victim* 237) This interpretation demonstrates Leventhal's belief in his leading role as a husband. Despite being completely unable to sustain himself without his wife, he interprets Mary's words as submissive to maintain an illusion of control in their relationship.

This illusion is further suggested in the last chapter which describes Leventhal's life after Mary's return. Although “things went well for him in the next few years. The consciousness of an unremitting daily fight, though still present, was fainter and less troubling” (242) the reality suggests otherwise. Indeed, Mary is now heavily pregnant, due to give birth to their first child in a month. If this is the case, “her ability to restore normalcy” (174) on which Leventhal so heavily relies is merely an illusion for her status will change from wife to mother forcing Leventhal to accommodate the drastic changes to come.

Additionally, in the last chapter Mary has convinced Leventhal to go to the theatre arguing that she will “be tied down ... for a long time to come” (*Victim* 244), thus once again affirming her agency and her power in the relationship. As they arrive to the theatre, Allbee reappears with a famous actress whom Mary recognises instantly. Interestingly, if Mary recognises the actress she seems unfamiliar with Allbee – “I don't recognize him”. Not only does this fact reinstate the lack of communication between Leventhal and Mary, it also highlights Leventhal's emotional isolation for he has never mentioned to her the events which occurred as she was away. Thus, as Leventhal admires Allbee's ability to control his escort – “he's got that woman under his thumb” (247) – and his reversal of fortune, he

simultaneously realises his own lack of freedom. Unlike Allbee Leventhal has remained dependent on Mary to keep his life monotonous and ordinary.

Allbee looked more than moderately prosperous in the dinner jacket and the silk seamed formal trousers. To say nothing of the flower. The flower struck Leventhal in a very curious way as a mark of something extraordinary, barbaric, rich, even decadent. 'Yes, he's gone places'. (246-247)

Whilst Allbee's appearance suggests a life lived to the fullest, Leventhal stays behind and as Allbee "ran in and sprang up the stairs. Leventhal and Mary were still in the aisle when the houselights went off. An usher showed them to their seats." (250). Leventhal's inability to understand "who runs things" (247) together with his fear of failure has forced him to abandon his free will to remain a spectator of his own life, a victim of his lack of personal drive. The normalcy that Mary restores is but an escape from his own responsibilities which the birth of his first child will undoubtedly disturb.

In *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm encounters a similar situation. Despite being the one who left his wife and two children, he nevertheless finds himself unable to cope with the pressure of life outside of wedlock. In a similar fashion to *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, *Seize the Day* revolves around a particular episode which occurs as the wife remains conspicuously absent yet maintains her influence. "She hates me. I feel that she's strangling me. I can't catch my breath. She just has fixed herself on me to kill me. She can do it long distance." (*Seize* 48) If Wilhelm feels powerless and does not seem able to disregard Margaret's ceaseless demand for money, his father argues that Wilhelm victimises himself. "Dr Adler felt that his son was indulging too much in his emotions. ... 'Wilky, it's entirely your own fault. You don't have to allow it.'" (47-9) Wilhelm, however, is incapable of protecting himself against Margaret as he has nothing else to offer his children. "But I love my boys. I didn't abandon them." (50) Although he insists on meeting his children to spend time with them, he seems unable to understand what their everyday needs are. He argues that he does

not “want them to lack anything” (46) and therefore, feels obliged to pay “premiums on two policies for the boys” (45) yet fails to realise that the policy would only benefit Margaret should anything fatal happen to his children. His inability to understand the actual needs of his children – such as having parents at home or keeping their dog (see 47/113) – together with his childish understanding of the law – “The court says, 'You want to be free. Then you have to work twice as hard – twice, at least! Work! You bum.'” (49) – and his denial of responsibilities in his separation with his wife demonstrate a lack of personal engagement with the reality of his situation as a husband and father.

Several elements highlight Wilhelm's childish behaviour and his lack of agency. His whole life, Wilhelm has been unable to resist the promise of “fame and fortune” (18). Gullible, he seems unable to resist the possibility to acquire status and wealth with ease even despite his own better judgement.

After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times. Ten such decisions made up the history of his life. He had decided that it would be a bad mistake to go to Hollywood, and then he went. He had made up his mind not to marry his wife, but ran off and got married. He had resolved not to invest money with Tamkin and then had given him a check. (23)

His romantic notions constantly undermine his achievements and leads to his downfall. If Wilhelm mentions his interest in British poetry as “one accomplishment ... he could recall with pleasure” (13) he fails to see the correlation between his “involuntary memory” (13) and his actual situation. Partially remembering Milton “Lycidas³” (1637) Wilhelm quotes “Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor” (13) yet does not realise the allegorical correspondence with his own situation as he blindly runs to ruin. Crucially, each of his bad decisions stems for his romanticisation of relationships and his needs to be looked after exclusively. “It is my childish mind that thinks people are ready to give it just because you need it.” (93) Thus, unable to deal with the changes in his relationship with Margaret as his

³ In “Lycidas” Milton mourns a friend who died at sea.

father suspects “Did you have bed-trouble with her? Then you should have stuck it out. ... But you wouldn't, so now you pay for your stupid romantic notions” (51) Wilhelm finds temporary solace with Olive a “small, pretty, dark girl” (94) until marriage becomes a necessity and Wilhelm finds himself unable to finalise his separation with Margaret.

Once again, Wilhelm lacks practical skills and relies on others to either put up with his situation or help him resolve it. Unable to take responsibilities, he refuses to accept changes in his relationship and romanticises their past. “Wilhelm's recollection went on. Margaret nursed him. They had had two rooms of furniture, which was later seized. She sat on the bed and read to him. ... Twenty years ago, in a neat blue wool suit ... he could plainly see her.” (*Victim* 89/95) Wilhelm's memories suggests a desire to return to times where Margaret's motherly feelings were directed to him rather than to her own children. He had also lost everything at the time but unlike in the present situation, Margaret was supportive and caring. Together with his return to his father and his trust in Dr. Tamkin who promises him a carefree life, Wilhelm's inability to share Margaret with his own children highlights his inability to take care of himself and to assume his responsibilities. Wilhelm's lack of agency stems from his inability to support himself single-handedly and prevents him from seeking divorce as a result. Thus, as Joseph and Leventhal before him, Wilhelm depends on his wife in his everyday life and cannot function without her support even if it simultaneously suffocates him.

Crucially, in each of the three novels, the feeling of displacement and the lack of agency that the husbands experience strongly relates to their intimate relationship. Despite their willingness to call the shots, none of them is capable of taking control of their own life. As a result, their role in both their private and public life remains limited and at the mercy of external factors. As the following chapters will detail, their life as well as their role as American men become increasingly influenced by faceless social organisations which reshape the American masculine experience to serve their own agenda. These organisations

(be it the army, a corporate enterprise, the stock market or a marriage) rely on predetermined and generalised rules that dictate daily life whilst reducing individual freedom. In the following three chapters, I will analyse these influences in light of the social climate of the period during which each of the novels were written in order to highlight their specificities in regard to their depictions of the American masculine experience.

4. ***Dangling Man* – from 'Tough Boys' to 'Friendly Aliens'** The Rise of the Absurd in The American Masculine Experience

In 1944, amidst the chaos and uncertainties brought forth by World War II, Bellow publishes his début novel *Dangling Man*, a war novel which depicts Joseph's struggles with induction. Having quit his job seven months ago, Joseph faces a bureaucratic nightmare which constantly delays his induction. Unable to cope with freedom, Joseph approaches idleness guiltily and avoids social contacts for fear of exposing his situation. Isolated, he writes his feelings in a journal which eventually becomes both an escape and a platform for his existential crisis. Unable to maintain the type of “asceticism and rigor” (*Dangling Man* 1) at the heart of masculine success, Joseph is an anti-hero – an intellectual who intends to expose his weaknesses in a desperate attempt to counteract his feelings of demoralization. Opposing “the code of the tough boy,” (1) Joseph exposes his anxiety by indulging in a sentimentality mixed with fear and guilt. Unlike praised men of actions, he confesses his growing inability to use his time productively. In “an era of hardboiled-dom” (1), his lack of entrepreneurship and his willingness to explore his feelings testify of a struggle with masculinity.

Failing to see the greater picture, he interprets the delay in his induction as an emasculation, an event which somehow reflects on his identity in negative tones. Desperate to find a meaning to the ordeal in which he is confronted, Joseph questions his humanity in isolation and notices the illusory quality of his former convictions. “Alone ten hours a day in a single room” (*Dangling* 2), he proves unable to overcome his feelings of alienation and non-conformity and slowly spirals into despair. As an intellectual “who has not stopped thinking of himself as a scholar” (16), Joseph opposes himself to the war heroes of Ernest

Hemingway's novels⁴. Unlike tales of heroic dimension, full of silent protagonists who “fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon⁵” (2), Bellow describes, with Joseph, the downfall of a formerly well adapted individual who now struggles to maintain his identity.

Joseph's erudite analysis of his inner life have led critics to assimilate *Dangling Man* to the existentialist corpus, especially to Sartre's *Nausea*⁶. However, if Joseph's quest to uncover his authentic self corresponds to the leitmotif of Existentialism, the similarities – both in style and in form – between Sartre's work and Bellow's novel do not suffice to cast Bellow's writing within the framework of French Existentialism. Nevertheless, both novels rely on a first person narrator who depicts personally selected episodes of his life in a journal in an attempt to shade an overwhelming “feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world” (*Dangling* 17). Severed from society, isolated and idle, Roquentin in *Nausea* and Joseph in *Dangling Man* question existence in the hope of finding individual meaning. Yet, Sartre's novel – unlike Bellow's, has been written in an attempt to translate specific philosophical beliefs in a literary manner. Sartre's literature is, therefore, contrived for it must translate a philosophical argument and demonstrate first and foremost Sartre's expertise in the phenomenology at hand. Free from such constraints, Bellow explores the incidence of social and economic factors on the development of personality. From the very beginning, it is clear that Joseph's identity crisis is not due to an unfortunate encounter with the absurdity of existence (as for Roquentin in *Nausea*) but rather to a set of social and political

⁴ Hemingway narrates his experience with WWI in *For Whom the Bells Tolls* (1940) a novel which prominently describes tough physical individuals who are facing their own death to convey an ideology. The story takes place in the middle of the Spanish guerilla, at the heart of the action. This clearly opposes Joseph's isolation in a secure and familiar environment. In Hemingway, death is first and foremost a physical matter, whereas Joseph experiences social death, in the sense that he loses his identity through isolation.

⁵This is a clear allusion to Ernest Hemingway's heroic figures, men of tremendous physical force who found inner peace in their communion with nature. In *Fiesta; The Sun also Rises*, for instance, Jake Barnes momentarily escapes his trouble with impotence by organising a trip to Pamplona, a Spanish city famous for bullfights. Jake, despite physical and sentimental struggles remains a hard-boiled individual.

⁶In *The Jewish American Novel*, Codde provides a detailed lists of critics who related Bellow's early novels to Existentialism. (123-125).

circumstances which have led him to question his own existence. In that regard, *Dangling Man* reflects sociological concerns with the effects of isolation and despair on masculine experience. Indeed, by interpreting the delay in his induction as a reflection on his identity, Joseph questions the very nature of masculine experience and the influence of social perception on the masculine identity. In that sense, his decision to join the army highlights a desire to finally overcome his status as a “friendly alien” (*Dangling 2*) and to finally become a true American hero.

The concern with social assimilation, that is with a desire to assimilate oneself to a conceptual vision of the American masculine identity has often been neglected in favour of a connection with French Existentialism. If some, like Clayton argue that “it seems especially strange that Bellow, a defender of *Man* against writers of alienation and the void, should create in *Dangling Man* a novel so close in form and spirit to that classic novel of alienation and the absurdity of existence, Sartre's *Nausea*” (57) they systematically fail to integrate *Dangling Man* in the American sociological context. This reading leads to a negative and reductionist interpretation of the narrative as a novel of failure in which “Joseph is clearly choosing the ways of the coward by giving up his search for individual values.” (Codde 135) However, Bellow infuses in *Dangling Man* his sociological and anthropological concerns with the nature of community and questions the nature of humanity in face of absolute social isolation. As such, Joseph's solipsistic struggle with his own consciousness – does not as Roquentin's diatribes against existence does – rise exclusively from an obsession to live an authentic meaningful life which reflects and nourishes their individuality but encompasses a concern with what is identified in *Dangling Man* as a “colony of the spirit” (24). As a result, despite a concern with identity and uniqueness, Joseph recognises the need “to relate to a human community” (Codde 135) even if the price to pay is the annihilation of individual identity in favour of “the supervision of the spirit” (*Dangling 143*). In that regard, Bellow's novels focus on elements central to Sartrean existentialism in the sense that they develop

around a quest for an understanding of one's humanity in a world which demands social assimilation and their depth.

In an age when the pressure of history and society are increasingly directed toward depersonalization and the corruption of consciousness, Bellow has dedicated the whole of his literary life to dramatizing the importance of preserving our concrete, essential humanity. (Halperin 477)

Overall, this quest for an “essential humanity” resonates in Joseph's quest for authenticity in freedom and relates heavily to the main existentialist concern with the human awareness of the self.

The negative circumstances which constitute the context of *Dangling Man* have often been the basis for its affiliation with Sartrean Existentialism. Many have read Joseph's failure to adapt to his circumstances, the absurdity of his situation reflected in his ongoing inability to give sense and direction to his life as characteristics of a purely existentialist narrative. According to Phillipe Codde, *Dangling Man* “is reiterating all the existentialist questions, and like Camus's *L'Etranger*, its search for value ends in total defeat” (138). In that reading, Joseph's request for immediate induction demonstrates a final accommodation with social expectations and corresponds with a failure to embrace individuality in an authentic manner. However, to read Joseph's final decision as a failure deprives *Dangling Man* from its reflection on the inherent social nature of man. “One of the most striking characteristics of Bellow's work is his view of the personal and the metaphysical as a continuum, in which personality finds justification in a universal principle or moral order which it reflects” (Opdahl 7). In that sense, Joseph's induction does not equate failure but rather demonstrates a willingness to take charge of his own life rather than remaining a victim of circumstances. Prior to his induction, Joseph describes himself as a well-appointed individual with a profound and unchallenged sense of identity.

It is precisely the change in his circumstances that triggers his existential crisis and as such his final decision to return to a more social context marks a desire to rebuild his

identity. As such, his decision highlights a desire to shape his own destiny and to take responsibilities for his actions. The problem, however remains, that Joseph essentially dangles between “the arc from the impossibility of alienation to the death in accommodation” (Klein 204). In other words, by demanding his induction, Joseph renounces individual freedom to escape alienation. Yet, by doing so he simultaneously renounces his own individuality in favour of the constant “supervision of the spirit” (*Dangling* 143) which is another form of alienation. Joseph's decision, therefore, brilliantly illustrates the triumph of the “absurd discrepancy between human aspiration and achievement” (Opdahl 5). Indeed, Joseph has deliberately chosen induction whereas his idleness was imposed by circumstance he could not control. Therefore, the ability to choose for oneself is the only tangible distinction between the two forms of alienation between which Joseph dangles. Thus, if Joseph aspires to find authenticity by choosing one faith over the other, the end result may have the opposite effect for his decision ultimately relieves him of “self-determination” (*Dangling* 143) and by extension of individual freedom.

If the renouncement of personal freedom and the illusion of choice which motivate Joseph to join the army are arguably a testimony to “the absurd discrepancy between human aspiration and achievement” (Opdahl 5), the concept of absurdity varies widely within the framework of Existentialism. What follows in the remainder of this chapter aims to highlight the difference between Camusian and Sartrean notions of absurdity in order to analyse Joseph's decision within an existentialist framework. If Albert Camus was primarily perceived as an existentialist in America, his vision of existence and with it his vision of absurdity widely differ from Sartrean existentialism. As a result, Joseph's decision can be interpreted in two different ways which when read together underline the complexity of *Dangling Man*. For Sartre, the absurdity of the world is located within the idea that:

To exist at all, I must be 'engaged', for example through my having values, without which nothing could appear more worth doing than anything else – in which event ... I should remain paralysed. Yet these

values, which justify my particular everyday choices are themselves the outcome of a 'fundamental choice' for which no justification is available. It is in this tension, between the necessary seriousness with which we are engaged through our beliefs or values and their lack of justificatory ground, that absurdity is located (Cooper 142).

In other words, Sartre's concept of absurdity lies in the indifference of the world as an object to mankind's necessity to give sense to its existence with a rational mind. In a Sartrean perspective, Joseph uncovers the absurdity of existence with the loss of his social persona. If before his enrolment with the army, "he is a person greatly concerned with keeping intact and free from encumbrance a sense of his own being" (*Dangling* 15), without social ties, he loses his ability to defend "his inner differences, the ones that really matter." (15) As he dangles, the passivity of his daily life together with the loss of his former self gradually impose the necessity to produce a new code for himself – to 'engage' with the world.

However, he acknowledges his incapacity to do so when he states: "I do not know how to use my freedom and have to embrace the flunkydome of a job because I have no resources – in a word, no character" (*Dangling* 3). In Sartrean terms, Joseph fails to engage with the reality of his condition and with the world as it is. Subsequently, he becomes a victim of his lack of engagement with the world for he does not give value to his every day choices and therefore faces the absurdity of a life without purpose. Unable to occupy his freedom, Joseph identifies "too closely with how one has been, with one's past, thereby divesting oneself of responsibility for one's future." (Cooper 117) He analyses his former identity in length and has a clear idea of the image he once reflected to the world.

Joseph, aged twenty-seven, an employee of the Inter-American Travel Bureau, a tall, already slightly flabby but nevertheless, handsome young man, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin – major, History – married five years, amiable, generally takes himself to be well-liked. ... He is keenly intent on knowing what is happening to him. He wants to miss nothing. (*Dangling* 14-5)

Joseph's idea of himself is almost entirely composed of external and ephemeral attributes such as his profession, his marital status and his age. These details are essentially pointless

for they simply demonstrate his desire “to avoid the small conflicts of nonconformity” (15) and do not give any indication of his character. If he mentions a desire to know his faith and to pay attention to his life, his desire to know “what is happening to him” (15) suggests a certain passivity. Thus when circumstances demand that he takes responsibility for his daily life, he can no longer justify his presence and actions and finally escapes his responsibilities by forcing “regimentation” upon his self (*Dangling*143).

Yet, his ultimate choice to annihilate his freedom – “I am no longer to be held accountable for myself; I am grateful for that. I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom canceled” (*Dangling*143) – does not constitute absurdity in Sartrean terms but rather a failure to justify personal choices. As such, the problem does not necessarily lie in Joseph's decision to join the army but rather in his justification in doing so. His decision stems from a desire to avoid personal responsibilities and the burden of daily choices and their inevitable consequences. Joseph deliberately abandons his quest for identity and self-development in favour of a strict code of conducts which liberates him from the necessity to choose for himself. From a Sartrean perspective, as Joseph disengages from his life, he deliberately allows the absurdity of existence to dictate his conduct for he abandons his freedom and refuses to assume his responsibilities.

From a Camusian perspective, Joseph's choice is neither worse nor better than any others. Unlike Sartre, Camus does not believe that any type of choice can bring meanings to existence. To him, the inherent absurdity of the world makes any type of choice irrelevant. In this instance, the absurdity of the world does not lie in the lack of justification to every day choices but rather “in the clash between an indifferent, contingent universe, and a human consciousness that is forever bent on clarity and meaning. ... Human beings desire a purpose in their lives, and the feeling of absurdity comes about when they realize that this meaning cannot be found in an indifferent cosmos” (Codde 102). Thus, if Sartre acknowledges the necessity of primal choices to justify existence and thereof the possibility to live a

meaningful life, Camus objects to this doctrine. To him, the absurd universe shatters the hopes to find true meaning – and this regardless of any choices. In other words, the universe is fundamentally absurd and indifferent and no engagement or morality can change its intrinsic nature.

From this perspective, an authentic life is defined by a total indifference and devoid of any moral or ethical choice. As Codde explains, “for Camus, all attempts to bridge this gap [between an indifferent universe and a purposeful life] are examples of inauthenticity” (103). This concept annihilates the relevance of any given choice in terms of its moral value. Whether or not Joseph takes a decision does not change the absurd nature of existence. In a Camusian reading, choices are irrelevant and life should be lived as it unfolds without moral judgements. Joseph's decision to engage with the world demonstrate an inability to accept the reality of life. For Camus, Joseph should have accepted his condition in indifference. The indifference that characterises a Camusian reading of Joseph's ordeal not only differ from the necessity to engage with the world that Sartrean Existentialism demands, it also underlines a certain negativity for Joseph's final decision does not offer any resolution or morality.

Yet, as George Cotkin notices in *Existential America*, if Joseph “plays at life as if it were a waiting game, as evinced in his willingness to dangle until he is drafted ... in a fit of affirmation, he makes a choice, takes a stand, and declares that he will cease to be a bystander and enlist in the army” (124-5). This choice becomes Joseph's refusal for indifference and radically diverges from Camus's prototypical characters who accept “to live in this absurd universe and ... wander in total indifference from girl to girl, from role to role, or from country to country” (Codde 103). It equally diverges from pessimism as ultimately, Joseph's choice for “regimentation” is an individual decision which suggests a desire to decide for oneself. Indeed, as explained at the beginning of the novel, Joseph is “a British subject ... a friendly alien” (*Dangling* 2) thus his enrolment reflects more than a patriotic duty. Accordingly, whether or not one approves of the strict regimentation of the army

becomes in principle irrelevant as Joseph has made a personal choice to confront himself to it. As a result, his decision can be interpreted as a step towards authenticity.

To be pushed upon oneself entirely put the very facts of simple existence in doubt. Perhaps the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during those months in the room. Perhaps I could sound creation by other means. Perhaps. But things were now out of my hands. The next move was the world's. I could not bring myself to regret it. (*Dangling* 142).

Joseph's desire to understand the world justifies his decision and therefore as he “takes a stand”, he liberates himself from the passivity which negated his former identity. Thus, despite the apparent negativity of the narrative, the protagonist ultimately faces life with the ability and the will to choose for himself and attempts to make sense of existence in order to live a satisfactory life.

As a whole, *Dangling Man* touches on various issues central to Existentialism such as the difficulties to combat alienation and anxiety, the question of choices and values and ultimately, the reality of personal freedom. However, the narrative is not limited by these issues. On the contrary, as Cotkin argues: “for all of his emphasis on alienation, death, and the absurdity of existence, Bellow remains a writer of hope, capturing the American existential demand for a dauntless attitude” (125), an attitude remarkably depicted in *Dangling Man* through Joseph's commitment to the danger of war and desolation.

Thus, if at first, Joseph fails to adapt to his social isolation, he does not abandon his quest for authenticity. On the contrary, his decision to join the army reveals his hope to experience the world on his own accord and does not “clearly fit the model established by the prewar existentialist texts of negativity and indifference, where the search for authenticity is ultimately abandoned” (Codde 151). If the narrative comprises negative episodes during which Joseph loses track of his own identity, their purpose is not a denunciation of the gloominess of French Existentialism (as American perceived it at first.). It rather reads as a denunciation of an “urban environment where genuine values are

supplanted by market values” (Codde 148) and in which self-development cannot be traded and becomes inconsistent with social protocol. It is precisely this disinterest in the self - “the code of the mass man” (Codde 129) that alters the American masculine experience by dictating the conduct of individuals and shaping their characters.

The first issue which arises in the novel is the narrator's concern with his decision to start writing a journal. He acknowledges that this “self-indulgence” (*Dangling* 1) is no longer well considered by his peers. Whereas this idea is founded or imagined, it does nevertheless touch on what is perceived to be the “code” (1) of conduct of Joseph's society. It acknowledges that in this day and age, as WWII ravages Europe, America disapproves of sentimentality and intellectual pursuit in favour of the “tough boy” ideology (1). The “tough boy” follows society's diktat – against sentimentality and art and as Joseph's brother, Amos, illustrates is successful in the market where he secures his financial well-being. Amos is the embodiment of this particular American dream. He reaches a wealthy position by twenty-five, his “family is very proud of him, and he, in turn, has been a reliable son, very much alive to his duties” (*Dangling* 40). Amos has become a commodity in market values and his principles are based on a consumerist vision of life.

While discussing “the hardship of rationing” (*Dangling* 42) during a meal with Joseph, Amos, despite being “patriotic,” argues: “You have to take into account what people are accustomed to', ... 'their standard of living. The government overlooks that'.” (42) To Amos, his conformity to the social vision of the American man and his financial success entitle him to the preservation of his lifestyle in times of hardship. He fully expects his good behaviour as an American to be recognised by the government. He believes that his expectations and habits should not be denied for they are in line with social protocol. In fact, his entire existence is inscribed in a capitalist logic which allows its value to be monetised and poverty to be identified “not so much with evil as with unimportance” (41). This consumerist and capitalist attitude does not allow for self-expression as one's entire identity

depends on one's ability to acquire material wealth.

Etta, Amos's daughter is the stereotypical product of such beliefs and “she prefers her mother's people. Her cousins have automobiles and summer homes.” (41). She judges people strictly for their ability to consume lavishly and disregards them for their lack thereof. By extension, Amos cannot “accept the fact that it is possible for a member of his family to live on so little” (*Dangling* 40) as it contradicts his beliefs and clashes with the way he brought up his children. Amos' attitude demonstrates how an individual often chooses to become “‘absorbed' and 'tranquillized' by the comforting, ready-made schemes of beliefs and values” (Cooper 33) of its social order. Amos thinks that being “alive ... to duties” and being successful in a consumerist market releases the individual from his responsibilities.

To him wealth, appearance and possession completely define an individual and this reinforces Joseph in his idea that matters of the mind and of self-development are no longer primordial in his society. The code, as he puts, it states: Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. “Do you have an inner life? It's nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them”. As a result, Joseph observes that people “are unpractised in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game” (1). With this statement, the disassociation between Joseph and his peers becomes at once obvious. When “they” obey the “code” and refuse to share their feelings and ideas but rather fight opposition with violence, Joseph indulges in “introspection” and analyses his difficulties in an attempt to regain control over his self.

Yet simultaneously, Joseph recognises that he lingers for a job or his enrolment for he does “not know how to use my [his] freedom” (*Dangling* 3). He realises that his inactivity has “changed” (8) him and he believes that through isolation and inactivity he has become “of no importance” to others. He has detached himself from them in such a way that he cannot identify himself with the world in which he lives. In his reading of papers, he

mentions that he “tried continually to find signs of their common humanity” (13) but whilst he once dreamed of a “‘colony of the spirit,’ or a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty. To hack, to tear, to murder was for those in whom the sense of the temporariness of life had shrunk,” (25) he now despairs of becoming a “whole man alone, without aid” (26). In short, Joseph cannot identify with those whose life has become a commodity with more or less values depending on the marketability of their individual skills – a life devoid of humanity but bursting with egoistic hedonism and the pursuit of consumerism.

Joseph recognises that he has always been concerned with existentialist questions such as “How should a good man live; what ought he to do?” (*Dangling* 24) and suffers “from a feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world, of lying under a cloud and looking up at it” (17). His former daily life with its routine and rhythm has prevented him from letting this strangeness overcome him. The delay with his induction as well as his inability to face the world deprived of his former identity lead him to resent others and to interpret their vision of him. Not only does he isolate himself as a result, he also loses track of his own person. Unable to cope with his freedom and “feeling that there is something unlawful in being abroad, idle in the middle of the day,” (5) he burdens himself with guilt. Joseph can no longer escape his own mind and in desperation chooses the strictest code there is to escape the burden of freedom. By becoming a member of the army, his individuality and differences are no longer apparent. Society provides him with a self-definition of conformity and a set of values and duties which does not call for justification. If Amos urges Joseph to take “his chance for advancement” whilst in the army and “become an officer” (*Dangling* 43) Joseph refuses to be anything but a “plain foot soldier” (44). Joseph refuses to distinguish himself, he favours anonymity so as to escape personal responsibilities. His aim is to become totally reliant on the system in place for his life to be completely regimented constantly. He justifies his position out of principles – “the whole war's a misfortune. I don't

want to raise myself through it.” (43) – “There is no personal future any more.” (44) Joseph decides to embrace commonness. Yet, despite the apparent negativity of that statement, Joseph's will to become part of a mass can be interpreted as his way to escape the burden of social code in order to develop himself. However, this results in the reinforcement of his dependence on others.

From an existentialist perspective, the dependence on others is defined by the ability to alienate oneself from one true personality and purpose in favour of a cult of the masses. There are various “modes of self-estrangement” which constitute an inadequate and untrue existence. According to Codde, if existentialists “cannot accept that life's 'communal character', such as the playing of 'social roles', is even approximatively the whole story about human existence;” they nevertheless acknowledge that “people are only liable to live as if the 'communal character of existence' were the whole story” (110). In other words, the need to conform to social dogmas exercises such a profound influence on the individual that it annihilates his individuality in favour of conformity. It is only when one reaches social success – represented in *Dangling Man* by Amos – that one feels allowed to indulge in his own individuality. If an individual feels that his former choices have altered his social position in a negative way, alienation occurs. This issue is central to *Dangling Man* for Joseph no longer belongs to any social groups whereas his former association with communism suggests a desire to be “devoted to the service of some grand flapdoodle, the Race, *le genre humain*” (20). However, Joseph cannot satisfy himself with the promises of revolution and realises that he cannot renounce his own principles as easily as others.

If Joseph has formerly managed to live a life with a certain contempt in his achievements and ideas; his sudden freedom makes him realise that in his former existence, he had identified himself too easily with his social roles. As Jonathan Wilson explains in *On Bellow's Planet*,

between leaving his job and joining the army, Joseph labors under the

burdens of a man caught between differing, and often contradictory senses of himself and of the world. Marking time, his personality undergoes a radical transformation, and he draws sharp distinctions between his 'old self' and his 'new self' (40).

This transformation is a direct consequence of Joseph's unexpected freedom. Here, in a typical Sartrean manner, the protagonist loses his grasp with existence and is forced to reassess his beliefs and priorities accordingly. As Garcin in *Huit Clos*, Joseph has 'fallen into the public domain' and let others 'weigh him up'" (Cooper 120). Through his inactivity, Joseph becomes convinced that he has "no character," (*Dangling* 3) that he is "of no importance" (6). He loses control over his existence and despite his will to find his true self, does not find in himself the resources to overcome social demands for conformity.

On the contrary, Joseph isolates himself. "In a city where one has lived nearly all his life, it is not likely that he will ever be solitary; and yet, in a real sense, I am just that. I am alone ten hours a day in a single room" (2). Despite his surprise at finding himself isolated, he chooses to avoid recognition by his peers. He has "fallen into the habit of changing restaurants regularly ... to [not] become too familiar a sight in any of them" (5) and remains "always afraid of running into an acquaintance who will express surprise at seeing me [him] and ask questions" (*Dangling* 5). This conditioning reveals Joseph's incapacity to forego social pretence in favour of personal ideologies. His experience aligns with the existentialist concern to rail against social and political conditions in which there is little or no scope for individual self-expression and idiosyncratic taste and opinion;" (111) without rejecting the social character of the individual experience. Thus from an existentialist perspective, the social aspect of human existence is not to blame for the individual tendency to live an inauthentic life.

Yet, in the eyes of another, one becomes an object thus revealing the necessity to maintain his own individuality as a subject with a unique identity in order to avoid Existential Angst – "the disturbing and 'uncanny' mood which summons a person to reflect

on his individual existence and its 'possibilities'." (Cooper 128) However, to abandon oneself is to "suppress a sense of alienation from the world by becoming 'absorbed' and 'tranquillized' by the comforting, ready-made schemes of beliefs and values which prevails in their societies." (Cooper 33). This escape from the absurdity of existence can only sustain in as long as one lives within the same rigorous delimitation days in and days out. Any changes in the nature of daily life has the ability to confront oneself to its own reality and trigger an existential crisis as a result.

In Joseph's society, an individual is praised by his economic success, thus by extension by his professional position which in turn delineates his social position. Joseph's decision to join the army should have reflected his social position but the inactivity imposed by the recurrent delays in his induction severs his social ties. Joseph who used to take pride in his identity now rejects it as insubstantial yet fails to identify with his current situation. As he refuses categorisation, his existential crisis disassociates him from his true purpose and renders him incapable of giving "all his attention to defending his inner differences, the ones that really matter" (*Dangling* 15). This idea has now become the legacy of Joseph's older self, the one which accentuates Joseph's current inability to stand for himself. When describing his former self, Joseph identifies that his "ideal construction" – "his obsessive device" (102) which gives credentials to his existence has been constructed strictly on the image that he wanted to give of himself.

Joseph, aged twenty-seven, an employee of the Inter-American Travel Bureau, ... a graduate of the University of Wisconsin ... married five years – proves to be somewhat peculiar. ... He is a person greatly concerned with keeping intact and free from encumbrance a sense of being, its importance. ... he is keenly intent on knowing what is happening to him. ... Joseph, since leaving school, has not stopped thinking of himself as a scholar, and he surrounds himself with books. Joseph's feeling of strangeness sometimes takes the form almost of a conspiracy: not a conspiracy of evil, but one which contains the diversified splendors, the shifts, excitements, and also the common, neutral matter of an existence. (*Dangling* 14-17)

In a dramatic way, his current situation has forced Joseph outside of his comfort zone and

allowed finally identify the mechanisms of the “conspiracy” which to him represent social protocol. Although, his friends and relative admit that he “has a close grasp on himself,” (16) his existence is not authentic for Joseph has constructed himself in an attempt to embody social values.

The most obvious example comes from his attempt to remain a scholar after his studies. He “surrounds himself with books as a testimony of an “extended life, far more precious and necessary than the one I was forced to lead daily” (*Dangling* 2). During his lifetime as an agent/actor of social order, Joseph reminds himself of what he considers his true interest; what he truly desires to do. However, as soon as he begins to dangle and therefore, has time to read, he confesses: “Books do not hold me. After two or three pages or, as it sometimes happens, paragraphs, I simply cannot go on” (2). This demonstrates that his interest in books is not genuine but rather an accessory in his former self-definition. They were surrounding him as an external indicator of Joseph's vision of himself; not his true authentic self but rather his idealised self, the person he wanted to be seen as and to embody in the eyes of others. Thus, the conspiracy that he denounces as a form of life imagined as opposed to true existence was the inauthentic life that he was himself leading. His forced passivity on the social scene reminds him of this and triggers his anger.

This is clearly demonstrated in his encounter with a former comrade. Having to meet a friend who has a job to propose to him, he chooses to visit an ancient hang-out. However, upon arrival, he “immediately fell victim to depression” (18). He remembers the place as “a hangout for earnest eccentrics where, at almost any hour of the afternoon and evening, you could hear discussions of socialism, psychopathology, or the fate of European man” (18-19). Yet, Joseph whom has left the circle of eccentrics – the communist party – is now excluded and not granted recognition by his former comrades. Unable to accept this tangible rejection and the subsequent affirmation of the loss of his former social self, Joseph becomes hysterical. In a pathetic attempt to gain recognition from his former acquaintances and

despite his decision to “no longer [be] a member of their party,” (*Dangling* 20) Joseph insists that he has “right to be spoken to. It's the most elementary thing in the world” (20).

Overwhelmed by what he perceives as a personal affront; Joseph becomes engrossed in his past to the point of jeopardizing his current opportunity to work for Myron.

'Forbid one man to talk to another, forbid him to communicate with someone else, and you've forbidden him to think, because, as a great many writers will tell you, thought is a kind of communication. And his party doesn't want him to think, but to follow its discipline. So there you are. Because it's supposed to be a revolutionary party. That's what's offending me. When a man obeys an order like that he's helping to abolish freedom and begin tyranny' (*Dangling Man* 20).

On the one hand, this statement demonstrates how Joseph cannot deal with the dissolution of his former self. He refuses to let go and focuses on issues of the past or on issues that are direct consequences of his past actions rather than on his opportunity to create a future for himself. On the other hand, and even more importantly, he denounces the lack of free communication between individuals. He resents that a system – any system – can decide which individuals can be or cannot be talked to. The regimentation of the system, despite its claim to devotion for the “*genre humain*” (20) appals Joseph because it goes against the principles of the freedom of man and as such determines the fate of whoever decides to follow their principles.

As he states, to regiment humanity is “to abolish freedom and begin tyranny.” Yet, this statement seems in contradiction with Joseph's final choice to escape from himself into the army. Before getting to that point, it is, however, necessary to demonstrate the principle of Joseph's ideas concerning the freedom of man.

'We are afraid to govern ourselves. Of course. It is so hard. We soon want to give up our freedom. It is not even real freedom, because it is not accompanied by comprehension. It is only a preliminary condition of freedom. But we hate it. And soon we run out of, we choose a master, roll over on our backs and ask for the leash'. (125).

To analyse this passage properly, it is necessary to define Joseph's notion of “real freedom.”

As he utters this sentence during a conversation with “the Spirit of Alternatives,” (122) it

seems legitimate that his notion of freedom develops further than the absolution of wishes.

The “real freedom” is the acceptance that “we cannot make ourselves immortal. We can decide only what is for us to decide. ... The self that we must govern. Chance must not govern it. ... It is our humanity that we are responsible for it, our dignity.” (*Dangling* 124-5) Freedom, therefore, is more than the opportunity to fulfil desires as Amos seems to believe. Indeed, to fulfil desires, man is prepared to compromise his individuality which is precisely what Joseph refuses to do. Joseph's vision of freedom becomes the ability to take autonomous choices, to choose the course of one's destiny independently. Thus, if “real freedom” equates choice, it necessarily becomes attached to the notion of responsibility. For Joseph, the precondition to freedom is humankind's inherent responsibility towards itself. Existence as a subject calls for self-awareness and with the ability to accept self-responsibility for the choices that one makes. With responsibility, the choice becomes “hard” and fearsome, for once it has been chosen and has fallen into the past, we cannot prevent the consequences of any given choice yet we remain the sole responsible agent of the consequences of our choice.

If freedom equates choice, then each human conscious action becomes an expression of freedom and implied that the formation of one self is entirely dependent on conscious alteration of the present. However, in his affirmation against freedom, Joseph seems to indicate that freedom is not a fundamental factor of existence and that it can be escape through choice: “soon we run out, we choose a master ... and ask for the leash.” (125). Yet to renounce personal freedom in order to conform to any given social diktat, to choose a master or to be led through life only offers the illusion of a lack of choice. However, the responsibility for this primal choice is still incumbent to the individual who utters the choice, thus ultimately leading the consciousness to reiterate the process of choice. In that sense, and as Sartre explains, there is no limitation to freedom for regardless of the consequences, the consciousness is constantly confronted with choices and therefore, constantly free.

Thus, despite the limited scope of individual freedom, any free individual must be self-governed in order to live authentically. “Chance must not govern it, incident must not govern it. It is our humanity that we are responsible for [it], our dignity, our freedom” (*Dangling* 125). Freedom is to knowingly choose and accept the responsibilities inherent to any choices. In any situation, as dramatic as it may be, there is the possibility of choice and therefore, the possibility of freedom. If the influence of others cannot be denied or rejected one must be self-aware in one's decisions and not blindly follow a predetermined set of rules. Thus, freedom becomes the ability to choose despite the uncertainty of the outcome. Ultimately, whether or not the primal choice leads to a restriction of choice is irrelevant in itself, for choice is a sine-qua-non of consciousness and therefore, the only event that can abolish choice in its integrity is death.

Accordingly, despite the apparent conflict between freedom and regimentation, Joseph's decision to volunteer in the army is a choice of pure freedom as he does not let his enrolment be determined by chance or incident but takes the decision for himself. This is a crucial point because a misinterpretation of this central episode can lead to an “absurd” reading of the novel – in the sense that Joseph must choose the leash in order to be free, thus conditioning his freedom. In appearance, he has more freedom whilst dangling yet he proves himself unable to exist outside of a social organisation. Furthermore, he actually suffers through a series of events which are in essence “beyond our [his] power” (*Dangling* 124) and which hints at a higher power at play in Joseph's existence. Anxious of the image that he presents to the world, Joseph cannot accept his present situation for he wishes to be identified by his deeds. As a result, Joseph who is aware of the limitation of war and who does not enrol to follow an ideology or a party (as he had done with the communists) nevertheless chooses enrolment as a mean to regain an identity for he is unable to leave in isolation from external influences.

'Is the real nature of the world changed by it? No. Will it decide,

ultimately, the major issues of existence? No. Will it rescue us spiritually? Still no. Will it set us free in the crudest sense, that is, merely to be allowed to breathe and eat? I hope so, but I can't be sure that it will. In no *essential* way is it crucial – if you accept my meaning of essential. Suppose I had a complete vision of life. I would not then be affected essentially. The war can destroy me physically. That it can do. But so can a bacteria. I must be concerned with them, naturally. I must take account of them. They can obliterate me. But as long as I am alive, I must follow my destiny in spite of them'. (*Dangling* 125).

This shows that Joseph does not choose the war for its ability to forge his destiny but rather chooses it as an escape from the predicament of chance which has left him dangling whilst losing both his self-awareness and his ability to decide for himself. His passivity has become his leash and he frees himself by choosing action and therefore, he comprehends freedom and choice and uses them as tools to “become Joseph” (125).

The term “destiny” used in Joseph's attempt to summarize his vision of the war – and therefore of any other events – seems at odds with the concept of freedom and self-awareness. Indeed, how can one choose freely and presuppose the existence of a destiny which definition – “a predetermined course of events often held to be an irresistible power or agency” (“destiny” E2 *Merriam*) – in the same instance. Yet, if the term is at best disturbing in such a context, Joseph nevertheless explains his vision of destiny prior to the use of the term. To him, there is a sense of destiny in being human for “we cannot make ourselves immortal” (*Dangling* 124) and as seen earlier, one can only be an individual when faced with other individuals – as such consciousness starts with the presence of others. In his bedroom, Joseph isolates himself and becomes weary. As a result, he feels the need to associate with others: “I would be denying my inmost feelings if I said I wanted to be by-passed and spared from knowing what the rest of my generation is undergoing.” (*Dangling* 124). Despite his ability to question his individuality, Joseph proves unable to be disassociate from society.

At first glance, Joseph's insistence on remaining part of a social organisation suggest that he struggles with the idea of absolute freedom and asks “for the leash” (125) to escape

personal responsibilities. In light of Joseph's actions and passivity, this interpretation seems to explain his choice. However, despite appearances, Joseph does not follow the army blindly. His initial enrolment as well as his volunteering are the result of an educated choice. In other words, Joseph does not content himself with a life governed by chance or incident and if he acknowledges his personal necessity for guidance (thinking about a job, enrolment) he constantly asks himself fundamental questions about his existence and he is extremely aware of his consciousness. In the end, his voluntary enrolment in the army demonstrates that whilst dangling, Joseph has become aware of the essential difference between absolute freedom and personal freedom. He accepts that his life is limited by external factors and deliberately chooses to accentuate these limitations in a desperate attempt to understand himself and learn more about the individual identity as the episode in his childhood bedroom demonstrates:

I understood it to be a revelation of the ephemeral agreements by which we live and pace ourselves. I looked around the restored walls. This place which I avoided ordinarily, had great personal significance for me. But it was not here thirty years ago. Birds flew through this space. It may be gone in fifty years hence. Such reality, I thought, is actually very dangerous, very treacherous. It should not be trusted. (*Dangling* 142).

What Joseph explains in this episode is the power of the outside world to give us a sense of belonging and justification for our everyday life as well as their abilities to remind us that their significance is entirely dependent upon our consciousness. Objects and events do not have a consciousness, therefore, whatever one chooses to see, do or believe is entirely depend upon oneself, the object, ergo the world in itself, is completely devoid of meaning and indifferent. Therefore, the world reflects the attributes attributed to it by human consciousness, it becomes an externalised self which we use to justify our inability to choose or to move into our destiny. In the end, by choosing the army, Joseph chooses another set of constant in order to escape his predicament.

Joseph's evolution from young and dynamic man with a “close grasp on himself”

(*Dangling* 16) – someone who shapes his identity with great care “to avoid the small conflicts of nonconformity” (15) – to a man who readily abandons his effort to control his appearance in favour of the “closemouthed straightforwardness” (1) of regimentation highlights the limitations of individual freedom in social organisations. As such, it also questions masculine identity and its social limitation in the expectation that men should play a socially responsible role at all times. Despite his ability to question his place in the world, Joseph is constrained to discard his individuality if he is to experience brotherhood and community. As such, the heroism illustrated by the reference to Hemingway's males inscribes itself in anonymity for it demands of men that they embody the values of the social organisation at stake and little else. Additionally, Joseph's choice highlights the dichotomy between the perceived heroic manliness of Hemingway's characters and the queer “element of the comic and the fantastic” (*Dangling* 16) associated with masculine experience of feelings and sentimentality embodied by Joseph and his questioning of personal identity.

As a result, Joseph's masculinity is compromised by his loss of private and public power and anticipates as such a new type of masculinity “influenced by the emancipation of women, progress of science and technology, commodity fetishism, change of labor market and multiculturalism but also itself full of division, fluidity and uncertainty.” (Xi 138) Indeed, with the economic growth of American postwar urban landscape, iconic American virtues such as hard honest manual labour and self-governance become obsolete for the urban male who therefore must redefine himself in order to fit into a new environment. The struggle between the urban environment and the individual is further explored in Bellow's next novel *The Victim*.

5. ***The Victim* – There Are no Others**

The Professional Anxiety and the Corporate Assimilation of the Urban Male.

Published in 1947, *The Victim* portrays a Jewish man, Asa Leventhal, who lives a monotonous life with his wife, Mary in New York. His experiences with failure, both personal and professional, have rendered him thankful to be part of corporate America and he has abandoned all ideas of self-improvement and ambitions in favour of a seemingly sterile corporate lifestyle. Extremely detached from art and culture, or anything aesthetic, Leventhal limits himself to the professional world with which he associates sanity and righteousness. Not at ease with himself, he constantly feels that he “got away with it. He meant that his bad start, his mistakes, the things that might have wrecked him, had somehow combined to establish him” (*Victim* 15-6). Unable to come to terms with his success, Leventhal constantly feels uncomfortable in his own life. “Situations conveying a sense of displacement and misplacement recur frequently in the novel⁷ ... All of these situations suggest a general malcontent in a man who is not comfortable in his world, a man who has not really found his 'place'” (Porter 43-4). Leventhal's past struggles, his inability to distinguish himself and to stick to “the proper channel” to find a decent job have contributed to his phobia of professional failure and exacerbated his sentiment of being an impostor.

Consequently, Leventhal entertains the idea that he “had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful (he never forgot the hotel on lower Broadway), the part that did not get away with it – the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined” (*Victim* 14-6). His constant feeling of inadequacy means that he is extremely grateful for his current professional position despite a constant fear of being

⁷ Porter focuses on particular situations involving mishaps with tickets as a symbol for his alienation from society.

unmasked and black listed. Constantly doubting himself and his abilities “Asa Leventhal, a city Jew of guilts and duties – the city, his job, his brother's family are all weights on his back – blames everyone and assumes that everyone is blaming him” (Clayton 140).

Determined to meet corporate standards, he equates personal value with professional success. “If a job was worth holding it was worth being loyal to. Life without loyalty was like – Shakespeare said it – a flat tamed piece⁸” (*Victim* 167). This loyalty which refers to “fairness, a man's reputation, honor” (93), does not allow for the externalisation of feelings and opinions for it demands an abandonment of personal values in favour of a corporate world-view.

Despite the alienating incompatibility between his own values and those of his workplace, Leventhal believes that subjecting himself to his job at the expense of personal development demonstrates the type of integrity which will prevent his blacklisting. His recurrent fear to be blacklisted echoes a major concern in the Art industry at the time. Under President McCarthy, anti-communist laws were passed as fear of treason and social upheaval undermined the American government during the Cold War. The Hollywood blacklist reflects the practice at the time of refusing employment to entertainment professionals based on a suspected association with communism. From 1940 to 1950, the blacklist remained essentially unverifiable yet its influence compromised the careers of many artists. Leventhal's obsession with the possibility to be black-listed despite his lack of engagement with entertainment and culture supposes a desire to correspond to social expectations which greatly surpasses patriotism in its ability to influence every aspects of Leventhal's life.

Indeed, Leventhal aspires to become completely assimilated to his society to the point of denying individuality and personal choice. When discussing Bismark's individual

⁸This reference to Shakespeare is an extract from *Troilus and Cressida*, a play which narrates various episodes of the Trojan War. The “flat tamed piece” refers to Helen whose infidelity renders her unworthy to Diomedes. (read Act IV, Scene 1 for more details).

strength and courage, Leventhal replies: “‘Why should we admire people like that? Things that are life and death to others are only a test to them. What's good in such greatness?’”

(*Victim* 110) To personal achievement, Leventhal prefers the safety of corporate assimilation despite its clear impact on individuality. Furthermore, most of his acquaintances oppose his viewpoint. Discussing what it means to be human, Schlossberg states:

'There's a limit to me. But I have to be myself in full. ... I was born once and I will die once. You want to be two people? More than human? Maybe it's because you don't know how to be one. Everybody is busy. Every man turns himself into a whole corporation to handle the business. One stockholder dies. The corporation lives. (217-8)

Leventhal whose attempt at personal achievements left him outcast, is traumatised by rejection and as a result, he links social and professional isolation to poverty and decay. To avoid any conflicts which could lead to his exclusion of the corporate lifestyle, Leventhal denies his individuality and demands to be assimilated to the whole corporation.

Furthermore, his feelings towards his upbringing illustrate his fear towards the lower working class – individuals who did not join the corporate lifestyle – and his disdain of poverty. He describes his father as a man who “‘had lived poor and died poor, that stern, proud old fool with his savage looks, to whom nothing mattered save his advantage and to be freed by money from the power of his enemies ... The world, everyone” (*Victim* 93) and his mother by her unfortunate and mysterious death – she “‘had died in an insane asylum” (10). Fearing the poverty-related madness which assailed his parents, Leventhal judges people by their circumstances and by their profession. Strenuous physical labour is to him a sign of social failure, for he appears equally traumatised by “‘his brother's appearance, the darkness and soreness of his swollen face. Outdoor work had weathered him; the loss of several teeth made his jaw longer” (*Victim* 152). As a result of his fears, he lives an indifferent life with an “‘intelligence not greatly interested in its own powers, as if preferring not to be bothered” (11). Entirely assimilated to his daily life, Leventhal never questions himself but lives based

on “the nature of a duty” (*Victim 2*) to maintain his existence to its current standards.

To sustain this lifestyle, Leventhal isolates himself from idleness, pleasures, feelings, art, adventures, or discoveries and favours an exacerbated professionalism. Disinterested in everyday life, his extreme detachment from the aesthetic forces Mary to rearrange the flat before her departure. “Mary had moved some of the chairs into the corners and covered them with sheets” the dining-room ... had been shut since her departure” (18,78). Leventhal has so little interest in his personal space that Mary cannot count on him for something as simple as keeping “windows shut and the shades and curtains drawn during the day” (18). Moreover, accustomed to indifference and taciturnity, Leventhal proves to be a bad judge of characters relating Elena's grief to madness (see 199-200) or Max's stepmother's inability to speak English to a “desire to get rid of him” (150). He misunderstands others and according to his brother Max, has “turned into a suspicious character” (204) who lives according to his assumptions about others. Striving to attain corporate perfection, Leventhal easily blames others for their imperfections. He considers his brother's absence to be irresponsible and Allbee's drinking to be the sole reason of his downfall.

His own existence is, however, entirely mechanical and deeply lacks introspection, thus revealing a certain narcissism. His actions do not carry any personal and conscious objectives or desires. His lack of self-development reverberates in his inability to enjoy simple pleasures. Leventhal, who in Baltimore consciously “learned to like seafood” (11) now retreats home “after a seafood dinner, he barely tasted” (91). “Reluctantly” accompanying his nephew Phil to the theatre, Leventhal who “did not care for movies ... shortly fell asleep” only to wake up feeling “empty and unstable” (86-7). Altogether, he wishes to maintain his detachment from the world. Obnubilated by his career, Leventhal fails to interest himself in other aspects of existence and avoids any situations which demands self-affirmation. Instead, he subordinates himself to the professional world and becomes similar to an automaton, repeating daily tasks without any pleasure or content. This lack of

agency and the desire to assimilate to the corporate world reveal a new social position which inscribes Leventhal in the conformist current of domesticated masculinity.

Despite his contrived and unfruitful lifestyle, Leventhal does not thrive on opportunities likely to reduce his monotonous existence. On the contrary, “Asa feels that he has been able to overcome the tragic destiny which usually awaits the modern man, and in the complacency that results from his judgement, he falls into a lethargy as deadening as that which surrounds ‘the overcome, the effaced, the ruined’ [so accurately depicted through Joseph in *Dangling Man*]” (Galloway 231). Leventhal aspires to tranquillity, he lives as an object among others, a member of an animalistic⁹ herd – estranged even from human consciousness and natural desires¹⁰. If whilst living in Baltimore, he experiences a temporary social success – “he was invited to join a party that went to the opera in Washington on Saturdays ... he fell in love with a sister of one of his friends” – he nevertheless maintains “a kind of alien, skeptical interest” throughout. Never “entirely sure” of the girl's engagement and unable to cope with her mixed feelings – Mary's “old attachment to another man” – he crumbles and leaves Baltimore “too wretched” (1-3) to maintain his position. From his sense of failure rises a necessity for isolation and Leventhal finally focuses on professional success to construct his identity.

His previous hardships weigh on his mind and causes him constantly refrain his own feelings. “Impassive as usual,” (*Victim* 5) he detaches himself from his closest friends and relatives – “the boy [Phil] did not know him”; “he had not seen Williston for three years or more” (4, 80). This detachment eventually governs his social self. Haunted by the fear of failure, Leventhal disengages himself from the world and interprets alternative opinions as

⁹ Animalism: behaviour that demonstrates qualities thought to be typical of animal, *esp* lack of spiritual feeling. (*Penguin* 49)

¹⁰ Clayton offers an interesting account of Asa's “fear of sexual indulgence” which demonstrates Asa's inability to interpret his sexual urges and his transposition of guilt onto Allbee. (See Clayton 149 -153 for details).

evidence of persecution. His mental seclusion has become so profound that it affects his ability to feel compassion for the less fortunate:

In a general way, anyone could see that there was great unfairness in one man's having all the comforts of life while another had nothing. But between man and man, how was this to be dealt with? ... The error in this was to forget that neither man had made the arrangements, and so it was perfectly right to say, 'Why pick on me?' I didn't set this up any more than you did. (*Victim* 67).

The concept that “neither man had made the arrangements” illustrates his unhealthy disengagement from the world. If Leventhal is concerned with his professional and familial duties, he rejects personal responsibilities. This attitude forces him to objectify himself in the world to the point of victimisation. Unable to cope with criticism, Leventhal assumes Anti-Semitism to be the source of his social difficulties. His concept of Anti-Semitism, however, relies on what Keith Opdahl describes as a “Manichean universe”. Mentioning Sartre's essay “Réflexions sur la Question Juive”¹¹, Opdahl argues that “the Jew [Leventhal], for his part, facing senseless persecution or the “sufferance” of others, may have as many fears and as deep a need for order as the bigot; he too may be tempted to posit an absolute evil and locate it – perhaps in a second minority” (Opdahl 51). Thus, convincing himself that the world persecutes him, Leventhal can justify his passivity. At least until a gaze which singles out – “Why pick on me” – forces him to confront his agency in the world. Opdahl concludes that Leventhal's insularity suggests “the necessity for, and perhaps the possibility of – an essential self which accepts inevitable victimization because it glimpses something higher” (69).

Unfortunately, this religious conclusion contradicts his previous Sartrean interpretation. Not only does Sartre deny the existence of an essential self - “l'homme se fait; il n'est pas tout fait d'abord”¹² (*Humanisme* 66), he also argues that self-consciousness, shame, guilt, or even compassion rise exclusively from one's confrontation to others. “Par

¹¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Anti-semitism and Jew*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. Print.

¹² “Man creates himself, he is not all done at first” (*Humanisme* 66, trans. mine)

l'apparition même d'autrui, je suis mis en mesure de porter un jugement sur moi-même comme sur un objet, car c'est comme objet que j'apparais à autrui¹³” (*L'Etre et le Néant* 260). In that sense, Allbee's gaze triggers Leventhal's self-consciousness as he becomes aware of his passive subjectivity. Suddenly, ramifications are exposed and personal decisions become the trigger to “arrangements” which affect both oneself and the others. Leventhal does not create an essential self to ease his inevitable victimisation, as Opdahl argues, but rather as Harkavy reflects he succumbs himself “to all the things that are said against us” (*Victim* 110), thus using Anti-Semitism as a refuge from individuality.

However, with Allbee, Leventhal is singled out and must become conscious of his presence in the world as an individual and the world's demands for self-control and engagement finally present themselves to him.

Considering the complexities of causality, one cannot say “You are guilty”, but one must answer, “I am responsible.” These are not the same – Asa, feeling guilt, rejects responsibility: accepting responsibility, he feels less guilt. One responds, to relieve the other's suffering. And if all are one, the other's suffering is one's own, too (Clayton 165).

If Clayton's argument partially explains Leventhal's acceptance of Allbee's breach of privacy, it misreads his intentionality. Indeed, despite his dangling between guilt and responsibility, Leventhal does not genuinely associate with Allbee's suffering but rather dismisses it as a consequence of Allbee's self-inflicted drunkenness. Thus, despite a certain familiarity with the human condition – that is according to Sartre, “l'homme est condamné à être libre ... [et] il est responsable de tous les hommes¹⁴” (*Humanisme* 39/41) – Leventhal wishes to maintain a distance between himself and the world. However, to refuse the other as a necessity to create oneself is to refuse the fundamental principle of human nature – to create one self alongside others.

¹³ “By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgement on myself as an object ... I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me” (trans. *Using Sartre* 132).

¹⁴ “Man is condemned to be free ... [and] he is responsible for every other man” (*Humanisme* 39/31 trans. mine)

Generally uncomfortable with the world, Leventhal is unable to cope in a New York “as hot as Bangkok” (*Victim* 1). He feels uncomfortable in standard clothing whenever he finds himself in a public space. “Leventhal's clothing, especially his shirt bound and chafed him,” “his tight suit was already crumpled; his collar was soaked with sweat” (215/245) and he often misses buses, ferries, or has undesired items sold to him. His inability to fit his environment adds to the feeling of unfamiliarity created by Mary's absence. “The flat was unbearably empty. He hoped someone had remembered that Mary was away and had come to keep him company” (*Victim* 19). With Mary's departure, both his environment and his solitude affect his nerves and increase his unsteadiness and self-doubt. Unable to occupy himself, Leventhal ponders the events of the day and reflects on his decision to leave work early to the point of obsession.

Eventually guilt and responsibilities obsess Leventhal to the point that “he was threatened by something while he slept” (*Victim* 20). A “something” that transposes as “an unclear dream in which he held himself off like an unwilling spectator; yet it was he that did everything” (141). His unsteadiness, after Mary's departure exposes his fear of judgement as well as his lack of confidence. His unwillingness to witness and take responsibilities for his own actions transposes in his dream and demonstrates a fear of confrontation with himself as much as with others. If his lack of confidence is a direct result of his fear of failure, his vulnerability to others suggests a fear of introspection and self-consciousness exacerbated by his late mother's madness. “He dreaded it; he dreaded the manifestation of anything resembling it in himself” (44). Willing to define himself through his successful job, Leventhal cannot deal with others alone “he was too ready ... to believe anything and everything about himself” (44) and Mary's absence reveals it. Alone and confronted by an unfamiliar situation, Leventhal's defences crumbles and his weaknesses are exposed.

Traumatized by his past, by others, and by the fragile nature of man, Leventhal has lost his ability to act for himself: “you couldn't say you were master of yourself when there

were so many people by whom you could be humiliated” (*Victim* 126). However, despite his reluctance to affirm himself, Leventhal cannot entirely escape the commitments intrinsic to his human condition. As Schlossberg tries to explain: “A man is nothing, his life is *nothing*. Or it is even lousy and cheap. But this your royal highness doesn't like, so he hokes it up” (*Victim* 113). To be human is to *act* upon life and to transform it into something valuable. Asa, with his contrived beliefs in corporate America gives value to hard work and dedication, thus hoking his existence up, just as any other man would do. As Schlossberg the philosophical voice of the novel sums up, in the end, no one can be “more than human ... more than human, can you have any use for life? Less than human, you don't either” (113). If Leventhal qualifies this speech as a “joke,” he cannot deny his inability to detach himself from the burden of guilt and responsibility which characterises his vision of existence. “But then, as he dwelt on it, the whole affair began to lose much of its importance. It was, after all, something he could either take seriously or dismiss as an annoyance. It was up to him. He had only to insist that he wasn't responsible and it disappeared altogether” (81-2). Existence becomes a role-play, in which each protagonist is condemned to freely choose his feelings and actions. Yet, Leventhal is unable to dismiss Allbee, for *The Victim* “is concerned with responsibility and original guilt, borne by Asa and *objectified* in his relation to Kirby Allbee. The guilt is given as a *condition* of Asa's *being*, and the best pages deal with Asa's *moral* analysis and Allbee's appalling speculative earnestness” (Donoghue 178-9 emphasis mine). As a result, Leventhal's willingness to remain objectified prevents him from experiencing subjectivity and control. He does not control his life but rather offers it to corporation in the hope of becoming an insider. Thus, if his values and actions are controlled by others, Leventhal nevertheless believes that he has escaped a meaningless existence in spite of the inauthenticity of his public persona.

Mary's absence exposes Leventhal's inauthenticity by suddenly disrupting his routine and by condemning him to isolation. This situation, together with Allbee's demands for

action force him to resolve his lack of engagement with the world. Usually, Mary is in charge of every aspects of Leventhal's life outside work. She takes care of “letters, bills, certificates, bundles of canceled checks, old bankbooks, recipes” (*Victim* 175), of food, as the refrigerator¹⁵ has been emptied “except a few lemons and some milk” (19) and of social life, as their contacts can be found in her “alphabetized book” (237). Moreover, Wilma, the cleaning lady, who cuts the ice supply during her last visit, does not return to the apartment. “Perhaps Mary had forgotten to ask her to continue in her absence” (174) but Leventhal, phlegmatic, does not enquire. His lack of control over his environment demonstrates his inability to lead a fulfilling life alone. Thus, his self-induced sense of guilt and responsibilities becomes his “good acting ... what is exactly human” (112) and allows him to remain objectified whilst fulfilling his part of the social contract. It is indeed the condition of his being, without it, his existence becomes absurd.

As a bachelor Leventhal lives “in a dirty hall bedroom on the East Side, starved and thin ... he had taken being alone so much for granted that he was scarcely aware how miserable it made him” (11). After his wedding, however, his situation improves as his “spacious” apartment in which a “pervasive odor of soap powder” lingers attests. Yet, during Mary's absence, the situation quickly degenerates. “Within a few days the flat had become dirty. The sink was full of dishes and garbage, newspapers were scattered over the front-room floor, the ash trays were spilling over, and the air stank” (174). Leventhal is unable to maintain his customary lifestyle alone and expect Mary to re-establish everything. “He would wait and have Mary to himself in a few weeks, when things were quieter. She would make them quieter. He had a great faith in her ability to restore normalcy” (174). Altogether these circumstances illustrate a certain victimisation in Leventhal's attitude towards life. He

¹⁵ It is interesting to notice the refrigerator's noise which is systematically noticed by Asa as he enters his flat and which mirrors Asa's mechanical existence. Whilst Mary is away, both are empty, yet both carry on with their duty.

is unable to take care of himself and depends on Mary for all unprofessional aspects of his existence – in his private life, he becomes an object that requires assistance with every functions of his life.

Furthermore, his social self mimics his professional attitude and responds exclusively to guilt and duty. As such, his dependency on Mary and his overall objectification weaken Leventhal, who afraid of isolation, tolerates Allbee's invasion. Allbee seems aware of Leventhal's shortcomings for when requesting hospitality, Allbee plays the wife card: “Your wife is away, now. What if she were killed in an accident?”. The prospective horror softens Leventhal who finally lets him “sleep here tonight to return a favor” (*Victim* 138-9). As Leventhal's identification with Anti-Semitism and Mary's absence have already illustrated, Allbee's invasion further reflects his self-victimisation and lack of agency. Unable to stand for himself during unexpected or undesired events, Leventhal either isolates himself or subjects himself to the will of others so as to maintain his social position. This is especially true with Mary to whom he offers “no real opposition” (244) and whose absence, therefore, creates a void of which Allbee takes advantage.

Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Leventhal lives an inauthentic life for he denies his responsibilities and wishes only to be assimilated to the social organisation in place. Leventhal lives unwilling to take responsibilities for his existence and lets external factors such as the oppressively hot city, the business, and even daily chores dictate his existence. His submission to events is so complete that when called to help Elena with her sick child, he is afraid of standing against her desperate and irrational attempt to keep him home. Leaving work to come to the rescue, Leventhal clearly senses that Elena is losing her self-control to despair.

He observed that her eyes were anxious, altogether too bright and too liquid; there was a superfluous energy in her movements, a suggestion of distraction or even of madness not very securely held in check. But ... he warned himself not to be hasty. ... The prospect of interfering, rushing in to rescue the boy, was repugnant to him; it made him feel, more than ever,

that he was an outsider. (*Victim* 5/43).

Thus, despite Elena's cry for help, Leventhal refuses to take responsibility for the child, arguing that "the mother and the child were tied together ... Unfair, thought Leventhal, not to say tragic" (43). His passivity and laissez-faire, even when the life of a child is at stake, demonstrate his inability to embrace human existentialist freedom and highlight his Manichean vision of the world. To him, the world and its tragedies cannot be controlled and human interventions are superfluous. If Mary's presence generally acts as a barrier between Leventhal and the world, her absence highlights his lack of identity and reveals him as a victim of circumstances. Similarly to Mickey whose fate lies entirely in Elena's hands, Leventhal cannot stand for himself without Mary's incentive. "I guess I really don't know where I'm at when she's away" (*Victim* 237). Therefore, as the title suggests – and before the appearance of Allbee – Leventhal consents to his victimisation from both his environment and his lack of self-governance. Yet, unlike Mickey who can no longer communicate and is at the mercy of his mother throughout the narrative, Leventhal is not a true victim, for he retains the ability to decide his fate.

Gregory McCulloch explains in *Using Sartre*, the type of self-deception in which Leventhal contents himself: "One knows yet does not know: this is bad enough. But given the translucency of consciousness, the self-deceiver must be (non-thetically) aware of what is going on: and then 'this whole psychic system is annihilated'" (McCulloch 54). Accordingly, Leventhal has consciously constructed his life to avoid responsibilities and to abandon self-governance in favour of a submissive lifestyle. He deceives himself and denies his agency in order to fit in the corporate mould. As a result, others are constantly in charge of his professional and personal environment. When alone, he no longer has "a conscious destination and was [is] distantly under the dread of being the only person in the city without one" (*Victim* 115). This lack of direction allows Allbee to establish himself in Leventhal's life. Leventhal does not seem aware of his inability to stand his ground. His decisions, or

opinions lack self-commitment thus producing anxiety and unsteadiness.

Additionally, outside his relation with Allbee – which strongly relates to professional competitive animosity– Leventhal's relationship with his own family clearly establishes his isolation and his ineptitude to believe in his own judgement. If at first, Leventhal dutifully responds to Elena's request to “come right away,” (1) his boss's remark that he “takes unfair advantage, ... like the rest of his brethren” (3) reveals in Leventhal a fear of negative association so strong that Leventhal does not even question the racist undertone of the comment. Yet, Leventhal uses Beard's remark both to reinforce his feeling of persecution and to justify his behaviour. Victimising himself, he does not return to work to avoid “trying to establish himself as one of the 'brethren' who was different” (9) and thus, reinforces his Manichean vision of existence. He believes to have overstep his position and fears consequences which never come. “Beard did not send for him; Leventhal's apprehensions were unfounded” (*Victim* 39) and the anti-Semitism exaggerated to justify his own decision.

This strongly suggests that not only is Leventhal unable to stick to his own judgement, he equally misinterprets and gives too much importance to others' opinion. In effect, Beard's remark can only suggest anti-Semitism if one interprets it that way. The phrasing is deliberately vague enough to suggest it, however, there is no clear association with Judaism except the fact that Leventhal is Jewish. Therefore, “brethren” could apply to Beard's work force in general. Leventhal creates and intensifies the anti-Semitism. He even willingly subjects himself to it by refusing to question Beard on the nature of his disrespectful remark and thus, reinforces his position as a victim. As Harkavy remarks: “Why, you're succumbing yourself to all the things that are said against us” (110). Altogether, Leventhal's identification with persecution demonstrates an inability to maintain and defend his identity which surpasses Anti-Semitism to affect all aspects of his life.

Indeed, his alienation is further revealed at his nephew's funeral. Fearing blame after the boy's death, Leventhal struggles with responsibility and guilt and “did not say good-bye to

the family” (154) as he “must expect to be blamed. Elena was bound to blame him and her mother sure to egg her on. He had argued for the hospital; he had brought the specialist; he had meddled” (147). It is interesting to notice that Leventhal does not blame himself for the delay in Mickey's hospitalisation despite Elena's confession of powerlessness – “I try everything. I don't know what I should do with him.” (*Victim* 5) and her “dread of hospitals” (7). If at the time, Leventhal refuses to contradict Elena and waits for the doctor's order before organising Mickey's transfer to hospital (see 50-3), after the event, he assumes guilt.

Once again, Leventhal arbitrarily reaches unfounded conclusions. Convinced of Elena's pending madness, he disregards her legitimate sorrows in favour of his interpretation of events. Discussing the matter with Max, Leventhal insists that “Elena was very queer about the kid and the hospital” (203) and convinces himself that Max wishes to expose a similar opinion. “He was in fact certain that the main object of his visit was to discuss her with him”– and does not “need a direct answer” (*Victim* 201-2) to establish the true nature of his relation to others. Together with his conviction that a black list casts people out of the professional world, Leventhal's assumptions indicates an objectification on his part. He only perceives himself through the gaze of others; a gaze which he systematically interprets negatively, thus exposing his paranoiac attitude to life.

With everybody except Mary [sic] he was inclined to be short and neutral, outwardly a little like his father, and this shortness of his was ... merely neglectfulness. You couldn't find a place in your feelings for everything, or give at every touch like a swinging door, the same for everyone, with people going in and out as they pleased. On the other hand, if you shut yourself up, not wanting to be bothered, then you were like a bear in a winter hole, or like a mirror wrapped in a piece of flannel. And like such a mirror you were in less danger of being broken, but you didn't flash, either. But you had to flash. That was the peculiar thing. Everybody wanted to be what he was to the limit. (83)

If at time Leventhal seems to be aware of the necessity to develop his personality amongst others, the possibility of “being broken” overtakes it and leaves him generally doubtful of relationships. Even with his brother Max, he does “not know how [to communicate] and he

was [is] afraid of creating a still greater difficulty” (200), thus effectively neglecting to help his distraught grieving brother. If Leventhal aspires to flash – to be successful as an individual, to be himself “to the limit,” he cannot remove his protective flannel, for he fears rejection and social annihilation. Thus, unable to fulfil his potential, Leventhal objectifies himself by interpreting the gaze of others as an acknowledgement of his shortcomings.

During the funeral, he interprets Elena's look as “one of bitter anger” (*Victim* 153) whilst the old woman gives “him another of those frightful glance of spite and exultation, as though he were the devil” (150). During his visit to Williston and Phoebe, he “submitted to this prolonged look with an air of allowing her the right, under the circumstances, to inspect him” (94). Ultimately, his passivity compromises his existentialist humanity. David E. Cooper explains that “to count as 'Man', a For-itself must be self-conscious in more than the bare sense of being aware that it is aware of things. It must also have a sense of itself as an individual, a distinct presence in the world” (Cooper 104). Leventhal, however, merely reflects others' vision of himself, his true being remains as distant and passive as “a bear in a winter hole.” Altogether, he refuses to engage himself fully in his actions and justifies his decisions by refusing to argue against the free will of others. Leventhal does not reflect his personality onto the world but rather hides himself from it. He does not want “to take trouble with people” for it makes him more “susceptible than he had ever been before to certain kinds of feeling” (83). Yet, if he does not not flash, Leventhal nevertheless narcissistically assume his righteousness.

In his philosophical accounts, Sartre defines an inauthentic life as one in which the protagonist does not recognise the necessity of a total engagement: “Si nous avons défini la situation de l'homme comme un choix libre, sans excuses et sans secours, tout homme qui se réfugie derrière l'excuse de ses passions, tout homme qui invente un déterminisme est un

homme de mauvaise foi¹⁶” (68). This implies that man must be consciously engaged in the world without excuse. If some elements are outside of one's control, it remains that one's behaviour towards these elements demonstrates the use of free will. Thus, similarly to Leventhal and anti-Semitism, anyone who justifies himself through determinism and circumstances victimises himself and his guilty of 'bad faith', of living an inauthentic life. Leventhal, who lives on impulses mostly generated by others, victimises himself for he is not engaged with the world but rather subjugate himself to external circumstances. His rejection of personal choice and responsibilities and his inability to stand for himself portray a man imprisoned by his own fears and beliefs. “His difficulty, he reflected, was that when he didn't have time to consider, when pressure was put on him, he behaved like a fool.” (*Victim* 19)

Typically, Leventhal lacks social and aesthetic intelligence, he rejects his singularity in favour of the mass thus becoming the recipient of others' beliefs. As Astrid Holm cleverly remarks, the problem with that type of 'bad faith' is that the “individual's way of looking at himself gradually becomes so different from other people's view of him that he is in danger of alienating himself from himself” (Holm 95). Allbee's remark perfectly illustrates this: “You people take care of yourself before everything. You keep your spirit under lock and key.” (*Victim* 124) In other word, Leventhal does not reveal himself to the world. Unable to dismiss the remark personally – “uncomprehending and horrified” – Leventhal associates himself to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and mumbles: “I don't see how you can talk that way. That's just talk. Millions of us have been killed” (*Victim* 124). The 'bad faith' here consists in Leventhal's association with a tragedy which does not directly threaten his life for the sole purpose of rejecting his responsibilities in Allbee's downfall.

This rejection of guilt and the subsequent assimilation with true victims illustrate

¹⁶ “If we have defined man's situation as a free choice, without excuses and help, anyone who refugees himself behind the excuses of his passion, anyone who invents a determinism is a Man of bad faith.” (*Humanisme* trans. mine)

Leventhal's alienation. Once again, he uses his Jewishness to justify his lack of commitment to existence. Trapped in an inauthentic way of life, Leventhal refuses to question his actions in order to avoid responsibilities for them. Typically, when alone and unnerved, he creates an escape and mingles with others. One instance perfectly illustrates Leventhal's tendency to escape his own consciousness. After his first visit to Elena and the sick child, Leventhal wanders in the park to avoid introspection. There, he focuses on the decorum, on the objects and the crowds surrounding him – “Some such vague thing was in Leventhal's mind” (21) – attempting to overshadow his overwhelming guilt for having left work earlier that day. He rejects his consciousness – the part of himself which deals with feelings and self-acceptance. He maintains a distance with his own life and does not take actions when required. Anxious to return to work, he could easily dissipate the misunderstanding with his boss by explaining how sick his nephew is but he chooses to remain silent. Leventhal is unable to express himself and to share his experiences with the world. Yet, when suddenly discovering during his walk that “he was not merely looked at but watched,” Leventhal becomes extremely agitated: “My God, my god, what kind of a fish is this?” (21) As the gaze externalises his presence as an independent entity, it simultaneously demonstrates his subjectivity. Thus, it momentarily suspends his inauthentic living as he is projected in the situation – removing the flannel from the mirror (see 83) – forcing him to finally face the world as a free agent.

Altogether, Leventhal's characterisation offers a bleak and rather negative vision of his situation. Obsessed by his success and his profound desire to fit in corporate America, Leventhal seems to have given up on personal development. His individuality is suppressed and his engagements are at best weak and incomplete. He does not create his path but rather lives life at the mercy of external factors. For instance, he blindly joins Harkavy in New York; without further considerations, “he threw up his job ... to put faith in Harvaky” (*Victim* 13) who promises him success. Furthermore, the world in which he evolves is limited to his detached vision of events. Leventhal has strong phenomenological assumptions and assumes

a role in the eye of others. He constantly performs, adjusting his personality whilst disregarding his true feelings. Leventhal becomes the duties that he creates for himself and which he deems unavoidable. He lacks the ability to think outside himself, thus becoming an absurd persona who refuses his total freedom and the reality of his engagement with the world.

This engagement with the world is a fundamental point in Sartrean existentialism. Rather than to ponder the necessity to be engaged – and thus to act on the world to reflect personal beliefs and choices – Sartre affirms that each personal choice reflects a total engagement to the world, for even not to choose is a choice in itself. Accordingly, as Storm Heter explains, the main existential virtue is an ability to “lucidly examine his or her social situation and accept personal culpability for the choices made ...based on a striking theory of individual agency and moral responsibility” (Heter web). From a Sartrean perspective, Leventhal chooses inauthenticity. He denies his engagement to the world and blames external factors for his actions. As a result, Leventhal is vulnerable to other's opinions and Mary's absence exposes him fully to external disturbances. Finally alone with his consciousness, he must face his own choices and learn self-acceptance. His chance encounter with Allbee signals the beginning of Leventhal's confrontation with his free agency:

And in the loom of these eyes and with the warmth of the man's breath on his face, for they were crowded together on the bench, Leventhal suddenly felt that he had been singled out to be the object of some freakish, insane process, and for an instant he was filled with dread.
(*Victim* 25-6)

Allbee's appearance triggers the first symptoms of Leventhal's existential crisis. His sense of dread and anxiety results from his isolation from the mass, from “a feeling that he was not merely looked at but watched” (*Victim* 21). If Codde is right to categorise this episode as the “perfect description of the dread experienced by a consciousness discovering that the world is inhabited by Others,” he is wrong in describing it as both a “Sartrean and Camusian idea.” (Codde 142) This episode contains a thematic present in both authors' philosophies, yet it is a

shortcoming to assume that in such instance, the look of 'others' is a Camusian concern.

Undeniably, from a Sartrean perspective, this encounter reveals the gaze, under which man realises his subjectivity and its consequences in regards of the world. Through his look, Allbee illustrates the Sartrean idea that “all human relationships are bitter fights in which the two parties involved alternately try to subjugate themselves to the other, or to subject the other, as the case may be” (Holm 100). Consequently, Leventhal's individuality is challenged. If he accepts to subjugate himself to Allbee, he recognises his mistakes and in essence accepts his responsibilities in the world, thus losing his objectification. Indeed, if Leventhal recognises his involvement in the world, he recognises his ability to make the arrangement and becomes, subsequently consciously engaged as a free agent in the world thus taking the first step in authentic living. If, on the contrary, he refuses to subjugate himself and tries to subject Allbee, he recognises his agency and becomes, at once, a conscious actor who must live life according to his own principles. This, however, is in total inadequacy with Leventhal's relation to corporate America – for the professional world demands a subjugation to the corporation and to its ideology. In both cases, when singled out of the masses by the gaze of others, Leventhal must recognise his agency and therefore, accept full responsibilities for his actions.

Thus, in regards to the world, as Sartre explains, “just as my annihilating freedom is apprehended in anguish, so the for-itself is conscious of its facticity. It has the feeling of its complete gratuity; it apprehends itself as being there *for nothing*, as being *de trop*” (*Being in Nothingness* 88-9). Leventhal realizes that nothing stands between him and the world (Allbee) but his own creation and by extension, his being becomes fully responsible of his engagement to the world. It happens so that his consciousness becomes integrally responsible for his conception of existence – outside of it, absurdity dominates. Therefore, if Leventhal attempts and succeeds in subjugating Allbee, he must repossess his own individuality and accept that he alone gives meaning to the world. To a man engaged in his

own existence, Asa's feeling that he “got away with it” (*Victim* 15) becomes the feeling of being “*de trop*” – unnecessary to the world and justifies self-creation.

However, as it has been demonstrated, Leventhal tends to maintain a statu quo in his life so that his 'bad faith' remains functional and prevents the nauseous feeling of absurdity. From that perspective, the only way for Leventhal to extract himself from his relationship with Allbee whilst retaining his objectification, is for him to become convinced of Allbee's insanity. Denis Donoghue, who argues that Bellovian protagonists seek a certain equilibrium, “a dynamic harmony,” suggests that Leventhal succeeds in ending his relationship with Allbee strictly through “external circumstances ... Allbee brings in a whore and desecrates the holy bed of Asa and Mary; so Asa can drive Allbee away without scruple, original guilt out with him. It is a generous contrivance, but a contrivance” (Donoghue 178-9). Thus, ironically, a contrivance allows Leventhal to maintain his mechanical life in which the dynamic harmony functions on a mixture of guilt and responsibilities.

This will to return to a mechanical life is strongly suggested by the metaphorical connection between Leventhal's feelings and the noises constantly produced by the refrigerator – a recurrent mechanical device in the narrative. When Leventhal settles down in his flat after his visit to Elena, “the motor of the refrigerator began to run. The ice trays were empty and *rattled*” (19) thus emphasizing his discomfort in solitude. And more importantly, just before he decides to throw Allbee out, his will to put the whole episode behind mirrors in the following anecdote: “the refrigerator *faltered* and *quivered* but always *recovered* and ran, *chaotically* and interminably, ran and ran” (230 emphasis mine). The moment of weakness, of unsteadiness and tremble has passed and Asa wants to return to his default mode of being. Asa rejects his agency and justifies his decision through the acknowledgement of the unsteadiness of existence and through Allbee's erratic behaviour.

Thus, if a Sartrean reading suggests Leventhal's rejection of agency as an attempt to reject the absurdity of existence, from a Camusian perspective, both protagonists struggle

with the absurd quality of the world. Camus is not concerned with the others and the gaze but rather with the dread, and anguish which arise from the absurdity of existence. From that perspective, Leventhal's discomfort arises from a sudden realisation of his true condition as an agent in the world. Allbee triggers in Leventhal a sentiment of absurdity, for Leventhal rejects all of what Allbee represents in the world. Georges Pascal distinguishes the Sartrean and the Camusian approach to the absurd:

Pour Camus, la condition absurde de l'homme ne réside pas dans l'idée exposée par Roquentin dans *La Nausée* d'être de trop dans le monde mais plutôt dans le sentiment d'être séparé, d'être étranger au monde ... L'existence humaine est absurde, non point parce que la société est ainsi faite, mais à cause du fossé qui sépare ce que l'homme attend de ce qui lui est donné¹⁷. (Pascal 179)

If Sartre argues that the superfluousness of human consciousness triggers the absurdity of the world, Camus replies that the absurd exists in the confrontation between man and the world: "I said that the world is absurd but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (*Reasoning* 161). From that perspective, Leventhal's discomfort develops after a confrontation between his self and the world – in true condition of reciprocity. If, as Codde implies, this realisation arises from a sudden awareness of the others, in a Camusian sense, this is not a closure, for Leventhal's experience does not exclusively concern the existence of others. To Camus the appearance of the absurd "symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the chain of *daily* gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the *first* sign of absurdity." (Codde 502 emphasis mine). Through Allbee's gaze, Leventhal becomes aware of his human condition – his subjectivity – but more importantly, he experiences the

¹⁷ For Camus, man's absurd condition is not found in Roquentin's idea of being in excess in the world but rather in the feeling of being separated, of beings estranged from the world ... Human existence is not absurd because society functions that way but rather because of the insurmountable gap between man's expectations and what is given to him. (trans. mine).

precarious nature of existence. He realises that he is not solely an element of the crowd but that his existence is unique and therefore, his own responsibility.

Where in Sartre, the absurd rises from the necessity and inevitability of a conscious engagement to give sense to the world, in Camus, the confrontation to the indifference of the universe suffices to create in the individual a sense of absurdity and dread. For Sartre, “un homme s'engage dans sa vie, dessine sa figure, et en dehors de cette figure il n'y a rien¹⁸” (*Humanisme* 53): thus with a freedom to be what he desires and a total engagement in the world, one creates one's own reality and avoid the absurdity of existence. Whereas for Camus, once encountered, the absurdity of the world is inescapable, to choose is simply to perpetrate the illusion. “The absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living ... he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose ... and became slave of his liberty. ... Belief in the meaning of life [in self-creation as Sartre advocates] always implies a scale of values ... Belief in the absurd, according to our [Camus'] definitions, teaches us the contrary” (Camus qtd *Reasoning* 178-9). Leventhal has “been singled out” (*Victim* 25) and forced to redeem his uniqueness in a world which suddenly loses his familiarity. His conception of reality is overshadowed by the apparent irrationality of the episode.

Thus, rises a conflict between man and the world which ultimately exposes the absurdity of existence. Camus argues: “I am justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression but that it bursts from the comparison between a *bare fact* and a *certain reality*, between an action and the world that transcends it” (“An Absurd Reasoning” 165; emphasis mine). Here, the “bare fact” is the encounter between Asa and Allbee. In itself, their encounter in a busy public park on a hot evening is nothing extraordinary. However, as soon as Allbee interacts with Leventhal, the

¹⁸“Man engages himself in his life, he draws his own figure, outside of which stands nothingness” (trans. mine)

latter realises that “it was absurd,” an unexpected episode between irrationality and the need for clarity (*Victim* 31). “The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation” (“Reasoning” 165). Essentially, the confrontation and the constant disagreement between Leventhal and Allbee demonstrate the absurdity of 'reality.' Both seem to have a valid version of what really happened and neither wants to accept the validity of the other's argument. Their respective world ceases to make sense, for their self-creations are conflicting. Accordingly, an arrangement must be reached for them to regain a certain control of their life.

At the same time, Leventhal does not want to take that responsibility. Camus explains: “It happens [under those circumstances] that the stage sets collapse. ... one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement” (Camus 502-3). The occurrence of that episode is critical to the understanding of Leventhal's position. Indeed, before Allbee's appearance, Leventhal's indifference to the world is a mere result of his mechanical life; which he leads in order to secure his self-denial and his 'bad faith'. As Harkavy notices when addressing Leventhal: “What's life? Consciousness, that's what it is. That's what you're short on. For God's sake, give yourself a push and a shake. It's dangerous stuff, Asa, this stuff” (*Victim* 225). This 'stuff' – the monotony of his mechanical life – corroborates Camus's vision of a thoughtless existence: “Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time” (Camus *Selected Essays* 503). Thus, if Leventhal can cope with Elena's interruption which he justifies by her “Italian excitability,” (*Victim* 1) he cannot dismiss Allbee in the same fashion, for the suddenness and depth of their encounter cannot be rationally justified. “Allbee had taken him by surprise. It was surprising. And in his present state of mind he was, moreover, easily carried away by things.” (*Victim* 26) If Leventhal attempts to dismiss Allbee as “a drinking man” (31) with “meaningless” ideas

(67), he cannot retain this view for he is, himself, “more honest when ... drunk” (225). Thus, according to Camus, this initial spark “awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery.” (Camus 503)

Allbee's appearance creates a doubtful momentum during which Leventhal “felt himself slipping into confusion.” (*Victim* 28) From his past, it appears that Leventhal cannot cope with such occurrences. When circumstances derail his daily life, Leventhal either abandons everything or questions himself excessively. Two years after their separation, Mary's “friendly letter ... stood on his dresser for more than a month, confronting him nightly and overriding all his concerns” (*Victim* 13). This suggests that Leventhal is easily overwhelmed by the slight change in his circumstances. However, trapped in New York by obligations, Leventhal must this time confront changes, as Allbee's note “lying on the kitchen table” (30) testifies. And as Camus suggests the disturbance in Leventhal's monotonous life created by Allbee's appearance has rendered the choice between annihilation and recovery unavoidable. As such, Allbee's failed suicide attempt in Leventhal's kitchen – “Gas was pouring from the oven” (240) – becomes the point of non-return which signals the end of their relationship and forces their recovery.

Prior to this, the unfolding of the narrative brings forth a complexity which highlights both protagonists' struggle with a possible awakening of consciousness. To Leventhal, Allbee's life represents what he judges himself lucky to have escaped. “Leventhal told himself gravely: down and out, living in a moldy hotel somewhere ... sleeping whole days ... It was something like that Leventhal was thinking of when he occasionally said that he had gotten away with it.” (*Victim* 31-2). Together, with the idea that “an important consequence on the narratological level is that, as in *Dangling Man* and other existentialist

texts, the actantial structure¹⁹ is again fully internalized. Allbee is a mere externalisation of Leventhal's alternative opinion" (Codde 142-3) – a doppelgänger from which Leventhal must disassociate to recover from his vision of failure, or reality. The fear which Allbee's desperate situation instils in Leventhal links both protagonists on an ontological level. Their otherwise meaningless existences highlight their respective agency, for it allows each of them to come to terms with the difficulty of *being-for-itself*. When confronted to one another, the reality of their condition as "human being with no fixed essence" (Holm 94) becomes an evidence. Both have deluded themselves and blamed circumstances for what happened in their existence, yet when together, neither can justify their version of reality. Thus, reality crumbles and both must reassess their "freedom to choose his [their] own life." (Holm 94) When confronted with one another's gaze, both protagonists lose their subjectivity – their respective lives become objectified and interpreted in a consciousness outside themselves. If Allbee blames Leventhal's decision to oppose Rudiger for his current existence, Leventhal sees Allbee as an inescapable version of an alternative life – which he had believed to have completely escaped.

Thus, Leventhal's internalisation of Allbee becomes an equivalent to Joseph's "spirit of alternatives" (*Dangling* 106). Leventhal categorises Allbee, he objectifies him as an incarnation of failure and refuses to recognise his possibility for agency and change. If in *Dangling Man*, this "spirit of alternatives" is entirely internalised to illustrate Joseph's awareness of his free agency, in *The Victim*, however, Allbee can physically alter the world in which Leventhal evolves. Both protagonists are objectified, a situation which allows for feelings of shame and guilt absent from Joseph's solipsist struggles. Both Leventhal and Allbee must assess themselves within their relation to one another thus accepting to be part

¹⁹ Here Codde uses the actantial narrative scheme as a tool to analyse the narrative. Developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas, this semiotics model analyses the structures performed in story telling. It identifies, the hero, the quest, the object of the quest, the initiator, the helper, and the opponent to analyse the narratological level of the story.

of the reality of the other. If Joseph develops an ability to see, through his isolation and constant introspection, the absurd yet inescapable necessity to choose for oneself, Leventhal's disillusion necessitates a physical intervention. Strictly speaking, he is not confronting his self and his own reality but rather the possibility for others to objectify him.

Thus, if Joseph's debates with the 'spirit of alternatives' gives him "a sense of someone's else recognition of the difficult, the sorrowful, in what to others is merely neutral, the environment," Leventhal discovers that he is "too ready to believe anything and everything about himself" and has, therefore, little control over his life (*Victim* 44). 'The spirit of alternatives' allows Joseph to question himself deeply before taking a decision. Joseph realises whilst comparing outcomes with "*Tu As Raison Aussi*" (*Dangling* 113-4) that the quest for "pure freedom" is vain in itself. He accepts that its only value is in the permanent necessity to choose and to choose authentically to create one's own essence. This realisation necessitates an ability to question oneself within oneself – free of external factors. Not only is Leventhal unable to achieve such self-analysis, he also entertains the possibility of a higher promise "something very mysterious, namely, a conviction or illusion that at the start of life, and perhaps even before, a promise had been made. ... He himself was almost ready to affirm that there was. But it was misunderstood" (*Victim* 243). If Leventhal seems to reject the idea of a clearly defined destiny, "it was a shuffle, all, all accidental and haphazard," (242) he nevertheless refuses to recognise his responsibilities towards Allbee. Thus, recalling his mistakes, he admits:

Some of them made him wince; others caught at his heart too savagely ... He did not try to spare himself ... But even as he did so, he recognized one of those deeper issues that he had failed to reach before ... [that] under Rudiger's influence he had felt this. 'He made me believe what I was afraid of.' ... that the lowest price he put on himself was too high" (*Victim* 101).

Despite his readiness to "accept the blame for losing his head at *Dill's*" (101), Leventhal transposes the responsibility to Rudiger. Unsure of himself, Leventhal cannot face the "fear

that the lowest price he put on himself was too high” (101). This reflects his insecurity and the relative easiness with which others can challenge his sense of identity. Leventhal can only perform his part of the contract insofar as others objectifies him on his own terms. If he does not question the necessity to put a price on himself, he cannot cope with the refusal of what he considers his intrinsic corporate value. Yet, as a true employee, he rejects responsibilities on his hierarchy when something goes wrong. Nevertheless, his conviction that he “belonged to the professional world” (101) and the idea that his identity depends on his material success forces Leventhal to abandon self-governance in favour of a corporate lifestyle. He readily subjugates himself to the corporate world by “pretending that we are not free, that we are somehow determined, that we cannot help doing what we do, or having the role that we have” (Warnock 19).

Thus, on an ontological level, Leventhal is defined by his fears and by external assumptions about himself rather than by his personal choice. Accordingly, when he reminds himself of Rudiger, he argues that he has merely replied to an offence of his part. In disagreement with Rudiger's perception, Leventhal sums up:

He thinks everybody who comes to him will let his nose be pulled. ... The habit of agreement is strong, terribly strong. Say anything you like to them, call them fools and they smiled, turn their beliefs inside out and they smiled, despise them and they might grow red, but they went on smiling because they could not let themselves disagree. And that was what Rudiger was used to. (*Victim* 37-8)

For Leventhal, his inferior position as an employee insures his innocence: “I had nothing to do with your losing that job. It was probably your own fault.” (28) Everyone else is to blame, for his actions are not deliberate but rather an answer to an external provocation. In Sartrean terms, Leventhal relies entirely on facticity – the elements opposed to the doctrine of pure freedom which “concerns how we are constrained by things: the 'coefficient of adversity' of our material surroundings, our own bodily form of existence, our past decisions and choices which have brought us to where we are now.” (McCulloch 57) His version of pure freedom

becomes a dependency on people's behaviour and on circumstances. Leventhal seldomly initiates the action and is amazed by his sporadic initiatives. When he invites the boy to spend the day with him, "he congratulated himself on having thought of Philip" (*Victim* 82-3). This illustrates how something as banal as personal initiatives is usually lacking in Leventhal, thus calling for a doppelgänger capable of creating actions. Accordingly, and despite the narrative focus on Leventhal's perceptive, Allbee nevertheless possesses a subjective freedom which is totally absent from Joseph's struggles with "the Spirit of Alternatives" or to Roquentin's famous diaristic realisation of the absurdity of existence. It is precisely Allbee's subjectivity which transforms the narrative from an individual quest for authentic self-consciousness into the depiction of the reality of existence between 'bad faith' and absurdity. Indeed, unlike strictly existentialist texts, such as *Nausea*, *The Victim* demonstrates the process of self-realisation independently from the will of the main protagonist.

Additionally, Leventhal's lack of agency demonstrates the Sartrean doctrine that existence precedes essence. Indeed, for Sartre, "il n'y a de réalité que dans l'action ... l'homme n'est rien d'autre que son projet, il n'existe que dans la mesure où il se réalise, il n'est donc rien d'autre que l'ensemble de ses actes, rien d'autre que sa vie²⁰". (*Humanisme* 51). In that case, whether or not one accepts his responsibility is irrelevant, for his actions determines his being. The essence of man is a pure product of his choices, whether or not he is aware of it. It demonstrates the relevancy of existentialism as a doctrine is not created by the characters but lived and experienced despite their will. It questions the facticity of life in an attempt to describe that the absurdity of existence necessitates a constant questioning and a constant choice. Life is not predetermined and is, even more importantly, unpredictable.

²⁰"Reality only exists through action; ... a man is nothing except his project, he exists strictly through self-realisation, thus he is nothing other than the totality of his actions, nothing other than his life." (trans mine).

However, if Leventhal questions his responsibilities, the validity of the Sartrean doctrine is not entirely assimilated. When confronted to Allbee's demand that he acknowledges his wrong doing, Leventhal bluntly rejects his involvement in the matter and blames Allbee: “You must have given Rudiger a plenty good reason to fire you” (*Victim* 28). If Leventhal is not inclined to admit that his actions can alter the existence of other, Allbee is all too ready to reject the blame onto others.

Unexpectedly, Leventhal begins to internalise Allbee and questions his self in light of his presence. In that sense, it becomes relevant to consider Allbee as Leventhal's dark doppelgänger. What is crucial in the creation of his double is that his inner thoughts, his beliefs, and his requests are expressed through Leventhal's vision of the situation. His inner monologue also highlights another peculiarity. His train of thought does not include his self as a first person narrative but rather detaches his being from consciousness, as if his own thoughts have no more importance than facticity²¹ or that of others. Accordingly, Leventhal considers his relationship with Allbee and its consequences as something which overpowers him. As Allbee enters the narrative, he becomes the embodiment of all that Leventhal dislikes in people. Having lost his wife for lack of professional occupation – “Well ... we were separated. Do you know why?’ ... 'Because after Rudiger fired me, I couldn't get a job” (62) – Allbee has turned into “some kind of a crank” (25). Leventhal who refuses any association with such symbol of failure confronts him narcissistically – his self-importance is exacerbated, he takes excessive pride in his achievements and has a patronizing attitude towards Allbee.

Yet, despite his reluctance to accept responsibilities, Leventhal recognises that his fight against Allbee is hopeless:

²¹For **Sartre**, facticity was the set of facts relevant or given to the person, for example his physical characteristics, his parents, and his unique position. It represents the contingency of human existence and belongs to **being-in-itself**. According to Sartre, this finitude of human existence does not determine our **freedom** or our fundamental project.

But what he meant by this preoccupying 'showdown' was a crisis which would bring an end of his resistance to something he had no right to resist. Illness, madness, and death were forcing him to confront his fault. He had used every means, and principally indifference and neglect, to avoid acknowledging it and he still did not know what it was. ... But the more he tried to subdue whatever it was that he resisted, the more it raged ... He was nearly exhausted now. (*Victim* 133)

Allbee's insistence that Leventhal recognises his "fault" and the crisis which his arrival creates becomes too much for Leventhal to combat. His exhaustion signals a breach in Leventhal's defence. Recent events, such as Mickey's silent fight against illness and Mary's absence, have forced him to accept his agency – his role in the life of others. If Leventhal successfully avoid agency in his professional life, the absence of Mary forces him to acknowledge his involvement in the life of others and the responsibilities associated with it.

The ambiguity which surrounds Leventhal's relationship with Allbee reinforces the constant power struggle between the two individuals. As their relationship is internalised, their fate becomes intricately linked and the contradiction in desire between Leventhal who wishes to ignore his agency and Allbee who seeks to become influential questions the true nature of personal freedom. Allbee recalls his past and insists that he was never given the right to choose his fate.

You have a choice. I envy you, Leventhal. Because when it came to the important things in my life, I never had the chance to choose. I didn't want my wife to die. And if I could have chosen, she wouldn't have left me. I didn't choose to be stabbed in the back at *Dill's* either (*Victim* 163).

However, after having spent "the last of Flora's money ... the connection with her" (171) Allbee intends to repossess his freedom and starts over, thus reclaiming his agency. As a result, towards the end of the novel, the situation shows a reversal of roles, for Leventhal is then portrayed as uncomfortable and in self-denial whilst Allbee seems to have overcome his fears: "But this way I've been decent, at least. I didn't become a success at her expense. I didn't become what I wasn't before she died. And consequently I can face myself today" (171). As Allbee shows signs of resignation which allow him to claim his agency back,

Leventhal blankly refuses to recognise personal freedom.

Consequently, the weight of consciousness, guilt and responsibilities crushes Leventhal and forces him to retract to his old ways whilst Allbee is finally ready to face the world and make choices, however, limited these may be. 'I'm not religious or anything like that, but I know that I don't have to be next year what I was last year. I've been at one end and I can get to the other. There's no limit to what I can be. And even if I should miss being so dazzling²², I know the idea of it is genuine' (193). Here, Allbee seems to state his readiness to accept the world for what it is and his willingness to partake to the best of his aptitude and thus embracing authentic living. Unlike Leventhal for whom recent events have accentuated his desire to avoid thinking about responsibilities, Allbee wants to direct his own life. "I've made my peace with things as they are. I've gotten off the pony – you remember, I said that to you once? I'm on the train. I'm just a passenger ... I'm not the type that runs things. I never could be. I realized that long ago. I'm the type that comes to terms with whoever runs things" (*Victim* 249). If Allbee recognises that he cannot hold a position of power in corporate America, unlike Leventhal, he finds a satisfying alternative which allows him to live freely.

Thus the process of awakening only installs Allbee in a definitive position at the end of the novel, whereas Leventhal happily retracts towards a chained existence. "The consciousness of an unrelenting daily fight, though still present, was fainter and less troubling" (242). In the final episode, the roles seem to be reversed for Allbee seems to have regained control of his life and found salvation in art whereas Leventhal has retracted into a condescending existence in which he convinces himself of his success for being a perfectly integrated element of corporate America. Together with the future baby, his life seems to offer the perfect image of success promoted by the corporation. Not a life of creation and

²² Could that refer to the idea of living life to the full to not be "like a mirror wrapped in a piece of flannel" (83).

self-governance but a life of labour and consumption created to promote through its mechanical aspects the strength of the country.

If Leventhal fails to reclaim his individuality and question his existence, Allbee constantly questions himself about human nature and self-governance. Yet, there is an important element in the novel that distracts the reader from what is actually happening, namely Leventhal's internal judgement. Throughout the narrative, Leventhal assumes negative traits in others and judges them according to his beliefs. Entering Leventhal's private space, Allbee notices that Leventhal is apparently "well fixed up" and praises Asa's ability: "It should give you a lot of satisfaction to have done it all yourself ... Raised yourself up, I mean." However, Asa assumes that Allbee is "comparing it with his own place" interprets it as "a lot of nonsense" (*Victim* 56-8). Leventhal refuses to give credit to Allbee and systematically rejects or mocks his opinions. His assumptions in general, but particularly with Allbee allow him to reject alternative interpretations of existence. Leventhal constantly misinterprets events and refuses to question his beliefs regarding reality. However, in true Bellovian style, at the end of the novel, Allbee finally triggers Leventhal's questioning of the nature of existence. If throughout the narrative, Leventhal's internal discourse generally ridicules Allbee's attempt to recover from his downfalls, the ending suggests a dazzling recovery. Not only has Allbee turned his life over, he declares to have accepted the absurdity of existence. "The world wasn't made exactly for me. What am I going to do about it? ... Approximatively made for me will have to be good enough. All that stiffness of once upon a time, that's gone, that's gone. ... I'm enjoying life." (*Victim* 250). If Leventhal can no longer reject Allbee as a delusional drunkard, he nevertheless attempts to minimize his flagrant recovery. During the performance, Leventhal reflects that "Allbee looked more than moderately prosperous in the dinner jacket and the silk-seamed formal trousers. To say nothing of the flower. The flower struck Leventhal in a very curious way as a mark of something extraordinary, barbaric, rich, even decadent. 'Yes, he's gone places.'" Yet as soon

as “the light came to life in the arches, causing him to squint and frown,” (246-7) Leventhal recovers his usual self and asserts that “on nearer sight, Allbee did not look good. His color was an unhealthy one ... A smell of whisky came from him” (*Victim* 248). Thus, despite the obvious changes in Allbee's appearance and existence – from suicidal wretch to wealthy and joyful escort – Leventhal focuses on symbols of decay more suited to his storyline.

However, during the entr'acte as he faces Allbee, Leventhal finds himself unable to deny his interest any longer. As a result, their discussion triggers Leventhal's curiosity for he seems desperate to finally understand what is “the type that runs things” (249). If at first, Leventhal considered Allbee as a self-inflicted victim, a man lacking dedication to the work place and unable to control his impulses, his recovery impresses him for it supposes free will and responsibilities. Indeed, Allbee refers to his former self and how he has accepted to change to the best of his abilities: “I've made my peace with things as they are. I've gotten off the pony – you remember, I said that to you once? I'm on the train” (249). In this utterance, Allbee refers back to his epiphany when after having found Shiftcart's card, he realises that “the world's changed hands” and that it is time to “be a conductor on that train” (196). Unlike Leventhal who remains convinced up until the end of the narrative that his life happens to him, Allbee accepts his responsibilities and chooses to overcome his difficulties and creates his own path.

The partial resolution illustrates in the final chapter has led many critics to argue, as Gilbert Porter summarizes, that “both men have come to terms with their personal problems, Leventhal substantially, Allbee only superficially. Allbee is a gigolo of a once-famous actress, and Leventhal, more relaxed and younger looking, is a successful editor and father-to-be” (Porter 29-30). However, recovery and resolution are illusions. If as Porter carries on: “Everyone seems to agree, for example, that '*The Victim* ... is traditionally plotted, well-made in the Jamesian style', a fully realistic novel in the tradition of the American novel in the forties” (Porter 32) this particular reading fails to acknowledge the subtleties of *The*

Victim's last chapter. Not only does this perception of the novel lead to interpret early Bellowian novels as "rather bleak statements of man's spiritual condition," (Galloway 21) it totally disregards that "we only get Leventhal's limited perspective, and time and again, Leventhal turns out to be a very bad judge of character." (Codde 144). If Leventhal seems to have lost his "sense of infringement," he nevertheless maintains "the consciousness of an unremitting daily fight" (*Victim* 242). Thus, as he is finally reunited with Allbee who "he believed ... had continued to go down," (244) he cannot help but to doubt himself for his judgement crumbles in the light of Allbee's success.

Finally, Leventhal shows some interests in Allbee's perception of life and eagerly seeks answers from him: "What do you do ... What do you do out there, are you an actor? ... A conductor? ... What is your idea of who runs things" (248-50). Allbee's alternative lifestyle and his recovery after his wife's death offer an alternative to the type of domesticated masculinity that Leventhal embodies. He understands that there may be a way out of the "delaying maze to be gone through daily in a misery so habitual that one became absent minded about it" (*Victim* 242). Leventhal desires to be sheltered from the difficulties of existence which Allbee unwillingly embodies until his recovery suggests that

what Leventhal must learn is that there need be no absolute victims, no total oppressors, only men who do injury to one another and who are capable of forgiving both what they have done and what has been done to them. But like Bellow's other protagonists, Leventhal never really learns this as well as he should, and he is therefore inordinately tempted to view as reality only what is sordid and ruthless. All the rest is suspect as mere sentiment or idea. (Boyers 39)

Leventhal (who lives in fear of living the wrong kind of life) refuses to forgive Allbee and instead focuses on seemingly negative traits to reassure himself of his own position. "On nearer sight, Allbee did not look good. His color was an unhealthy one. Leventhal had the feeling that it was the decay of something that had gone into his appearance of well-being, something intimate" (*Victim* 248). What Leventhal perceives as marks of decay and ill-health, Allbee's speech transforms into the price of acceptance of things as they truly are.

However, Leventhal is not ready to accept Allbee's recovery for it contradicts his vision of existence. Thus, as Allbee attempts to apologize for his former behaviour: "I don't want to exaggerate, but I don't want to play it down either. I know I owe you something," (*Victim* 249) Leventhal interrupts him to dismiss Allbee's confession as a mere theatricality: "What do you do out there, are you an actor?" (249). Leventhal's inability to have a genuine conversation with Allbee highlights the fact that he has not learnt from their former exchange and that he has resumed his quest for social conformity.

Thus, if Boyer is right in thinking that Leventhal cannot transpose sentiment or idea into the harshness of existence, he misinterprets the reasons behind Leventhal's shortcomings. Willing to conform to the values of "new images of heroic behaviors and manliness consistent with economic growth" (Adams 117) Leventhal embraces his professional life to the fullest. Yet, in his private life, Leventhal appears far less consistent and virtually unable to function without his wife. As traditional values such as independence and heroism have little place in a social order which privileges conformity, his dependence on Mary seems at first rather benign. However, in the last chapter, Mary appears heavily pregnant – a fact which alters both her and Leventhal's role in society. If this, on the one hand, confirms Leventhal's readiness to embrace adult masculinity to the fullest, on the other it presupposes radical changes in their lifestyle with which he may not be able to cope given his dependency on Mary's ability for "normalcy" (174).

Indeed, if Leventhal embraces a more domesticated lifestyle "by having success at home and at the workplace" (Martschukat 3) he nevertheless suffers from a feeling of misplacement which comes to light in his relationship with Allbee. As the narrative draws to a close and as Leventhal appears to embody all the symbols of the new American man, it nevertheless remains that "something about the queerness of existence, always haunting [haunts] Leventhal at short distance" (*Dangling* 245) and when once again confronted to Allbee, Leventhal cannot help but wonder "who runs things" (*Dangling* 250). It is crucial at

this stage to highlight that if Leventhal embodies the new American masculine experience of domesticated fatherhood, Allbee despite his success opposes social conventions and is therefore, considered an immature man.

H.A. Overstreet, author of a 1950s non-fiction bestseller entitled *The Mature Mind*, stressed that a man is immature if he regards the support of a family as a kind of a trap in which he, an unsuspecting male, has somehow been caught. Again, the person who cannot settle down, who remains a vocational drifter, or the person who wants the prestige of a certain type of work but resents the routines that go with it, are immature in their sense of function. (Martschukat 3)

Thus, despite a strong desire to conform to the social dogma of the nuclear family and fatherhood, the existential anxiety and subsequent doubts that Leventhal experiences reveal a fear of annihilation that is of becoming nothing more than a functional man at the mercy of an oppressive organisation of life dictated by mass culture. This anxiety is deeply emasculating for despite a willingness to ignore his compromised sense of self in favour of the corporate image of success, Leventhal's final encounter with Allbee reinstates his fear of conformity and as such questions the true nature of masculine identity as it evolves from the war heroism praised during World War II to the demand for a new type of domesticated masculinity.

6. ***Seize the Day – No More Place like Home***

The Marketisation of Individuality, the Monetisation of Prestige, and the Loss of the American Masculine Identity.

Published in 1956, *Seize the Day* focuses on the rise of mass society and its affects on social ties. Set in the heart of New York City, the novel portrays new types of social characters which echoes Leventhal's fear of social rejection and assimilation to his profession in *The Victim*. Their sense of conformity and their desire to accumulate wealth result from a profound change in social organisation which has in turn affected the core values of masculine identity and triggers an existential crisis in Wilhelm. Whilst retired men and women spend their money on various short-lived pleasures such as coffee shops and dime stores, the commodity market has become a playground with the ability to make or break fortune and life. Money-making is the newest obsession, for a successful bet has the power to transform a common man into someone extraordinary. "They have no sense, they have no talent, they just have the extra dough and it makes more dough." (*Seize* 9) In a mass society, monetary success defines characters more than any other abilities, dreams, or personal achievements. Increasingly men define themselves through possessions and Wilhelm who struggles financially is desperate for a rapid change of fortune which would free him from a painful life of labour.

Amidst the crowd, however, Wilhelm experiences the type of loneliness which borders on despair. Unable to adapt to his environment, Wilhelm dreams of a more natural and traditional lifestyle yet inasmuch as others around him, he is tied down by his vision of money as a maker of character and as the solution to all of his problems. Despite his willingness to fit in, Wilhelm is unable to maintain the appearance of success – "he liked to wear good clothes, but once he had put it on each article appeared to go its own way" and as a result, he sticks out of the crowd like a "fair-haired hippopotamus." (*Seize* 5-6) The highly

controlled environment in which he evolves makes him uneasy and he constantly battles a feeling of unfairness. He cannot cope with the superficiality of human relations yet seems unable to evolve without the approval of others. The discrepancy between his intimate desires and his social self create tensions which exacerbate his existential crisis.

As Wilhelm loses himself within the mass, his malaise becomes a metaphorical drowning. He experiences “man's feeling of homelessness, of alienation [which] has been intensified in the midst of a bureaucratized, impersonal mass society. He has come to feel himself an outsider even within his own human society. He is trebly alienated: a stranger to God, to nature, and to the gigantic social apparatus that supplies his material wants.” (Barrett 35-6). Wilhelm who has dreamt “to be freed from the anxious and narrow life of the average” (*Seize* 23) finds himself trapped by his lack of money. He wants to belong to the elite and cannot afford to be himself, for only the wealthy have the luxury of self-indulgence. With Wilhelm Bellow further exposes the difficulty to be oneself in a highly structured corporate society, “a businessmen's government” (*Seize* 9) entirely dependent of capitalist concerns. Unable to match his inner self to the world around him and without enough wealth to live independently of the system, Wilhelm has lost the fundamental traits of his identity and unlike Leventhal in *The Victim* he finds himself unable to conform to corporate standards and to assimilate the new social order.

First published in 1951, *White Collar* – C. Wright Mills' sociological study – analyses the cultural and organisational shifts which occurred within society during the first part of the twentieth century. By analysing data from 1870 to 1950, Mills retraces the occupational shifts within the labour force which led to the development of a new middle class – the white-collar. “Today the three largest occupational groups in the white-collar stratum are schoolteachers, *salespeople* in and *out of stores*, and assorted office workers. These three form the white-collar mass.” (Mills 64; emphasis mine) Such a change within the fundamental structures of society dramatically alters people's functions and their

perception of both the private and public sphere. Society becomes money driven and elitist. As a result of the rise of bigger, more anonymous corporations, man seeks social order in his identification with the business that he serves. This mass who has lost the independence of self-employed people heavily relies on external factors to acquire prestige. As “most professional are now²³ salaried employees,” (Mills 112) they must conform to their employee's ways in order to maintain their social position.

If this identification partially occurs in *The Victim* as Leventhal conforms to a corporate impersonal lifestyle, it culminates in *Seize the Day* as Wilhelm's desire to conform stems from a belief that wealth alone defines an individual. This differs to Leventhal who despite his willingness to escape poverty does not desire to escape “the narrow life of the average” (*Seize* 23) but rather wishes for complete assimilation to social standards. If in both cases, personal success can no longer be associated with the ability to create one's personal income, Wilhelm actively seeks to distinguish himself whereas Leventhal seeks standardisation. In both novels, however, prestige and status depend on the corporation and therefore, depend on an ability to recognise signs of success in what individuals choose to display. Thus, to acquire prestige, the new middle-class strongly identifies with the company which employs them.

The class position of employed people depends on their chances in the labor market; their status position depends on their chances in the commodity market. Claims for prestige are raised on the basis of consumption; but since consumption is limited by income, class position and status position intersect. (Mills 241)

In that case, one's identity becomes tied to external factors such as income and social position and self-worth is measured in dollars rather than personal achievements.

The money and prestige driven society analysed in *White Collar* echoes that of *Seize the Day* and Wilhelm's troubles stem from a similar social order. The following chapters

²³ “Now” refers to the beginning of the 1950s in context of *White Collar* (1951)

highlight these correspondences in order to provide an accurate sociological background that will lead to a better understanding of Wilhelm's downfall. Torn between his desire for freedom, his dependence on prestige to maintain his former lifestyle and his financial duty as a father, Wilhelm becomes alienated from himself. Stripped bare of his hard earned income, unemployed, Wilhelm has lost his identity. The interruption in Wilhelm's description of money – “Money is – is –” reflects the power that money has on his identity. Yet Wilhelm who expects privileges and “executive standing” (*Seize* 37) in his employment refuses to conform to anything less and chooses the uncertainty of unemployment and precipitates his downfall as a result. It remains that in this type of social organisation, personality is tied to possession and particularly to predetermined signs of wealth.

Whilst Wilhelm's lack of financial means turns him into a beggar, successful investors are identified by their purchasing power in a highly outer-directed society. “I know a guy at the Hotel Pierre. There's nothing to him, but he has a whole case of Mumm's champagne at lunch.” (*Seize* 9). In extreme cases, identity becomes unidimensional and totally assimilated to material possessions; for instance, the “whole case of Mumm's champagne” substitutes identity as the person purchasing it remains “just a guy” (*Seize* 9). When knowing someone means being aware of his purchasing power, the assimilation of identity to wealth dramatically alters personality and in *Seize the Day* acts as a denunciation of the loss of the American masculine identity in favour of a mass-affiliation to the corporate world.

Having formerly identified himself with the Rojax Corporation, Wilhelm suffers from the growing discrepancy between who he wishes to be, how others perceive him, and who he truly is, a man who clings to his former prestige:

In identifying with a firm, the young executive can sometimes line up his career expectations with it, and so identify his own future with that of the firm's. But lower down the ranks, the identification has more to do with security and prestige than with expectations of success. In either case, of course, such feelings can be exploited in the interests of business

loyalties. (Mills 244)

Wilhelm, who affirms that he “was promised executive standing” (*Seize* 37) during his employment by Rojax, has clearly failed to link “his own future with that of the firm's” (Mills 244). Unable to obey new directives, he has quit his job after a divergence in opinions. Thus, in Wilhelm's case, both the identification process and the sense of security and success which he experienced during his employment presently contribute to his alienation. Not only does he misinterpret his future, he also jeopardize his material security for “a question of morale” (*Seize* 37) which his father qualifies as the kind of “nonsense and kid's talk” (37) which borders on selfishness.

If he initially succeeds in his position as a salesman, Wilhelm nevertheless remains pictured as a childlike persona. His line of business is kiddies' furniture and he behaves like a greedy and egoistical toddler when he refuses to share his territory. “We parted ways because they wanted me to share *my territory*. They took a son-in-law into business.” (*Seize* 35 emphasis mine) What Wilhelm perceives as an affront to his personality actually further reveals the growing discrepancy between Wilhelm's self-perception and reality. Wilhelm is unable to analyse his own actions nor to take responsibilities for his situation. He behaves narcissistically and demands to be helped and valued unconditionally. Consequently, if his affiliation with Rojax company initially protected him from alienation by providing him with a large income, it presently aggravates Wilhelm's condition by nourishing his personal disillusion. Wilhelm's alienation stems from an illusion of grandeur – a sentiment of being larger than life thus preventing him from finding an equilibrium between his desire for freedom and individuality and his needs for deep sentimental connections.

Unable to detach himself from his former social position, Wilhelm seeks to maintain the illusion of prestige which he experienced as a salesman. Thus, he clings to a certain self-representation and deceives himself by maintaining his former routine. “And for several months, because he had no position, he had kept up his morale by rising early; he was shaved

and in the lobby by eight o'clock.” (*Seize* 4) He hopes to remain part of the white-collar mass by “concealing his troubles ... it was a matter of sheer hope, because there was not much he could add to his present effort.” (*Seize* 3) Yet, his relocation to New York allows him to remain momentarily alienated from his own failure:

The metropolitan man's biography is often unknown, his past apparent only to very limited groups, so the basis of his status is often hidden and ambivalent, revealed only in the fast-changing appearances of his mobile, anonymous existence. Intimacy and the personal touch, no longer intrinsic to his way of life, are often contrived devices of impersonal manipulation. Rather than cohesion there is uniformity, rather than descent or tradition, interests. Physically close, but socially distant, human relations become at once intense and impersonal – and in every detail, pecuniary. (Mills 252)

Wilhelm's relocation to New York serve two distinct purposes which both help him to maintain the illusion of prestige, at least momentarily. On the one hand, he maintains his child status by virtue of his dysfunctional relationship with his father and on the other, he works hard to maintain the illusion of success by leading an expensive lifestyle despite his limited wealth. In an environment where the individual's value depends primarily on appearance, Wilhelm succeeds in maintaining his former persona until his funds run out. His prestige is thus intimately linked to his social self, which in turns depends entirely on his wealth. As his fund diminishes, his borrowed prestige crumbles and reveals Wilhelm's true nature. Without prestige nor professional affiliation, Wilhelm's alienation increases to culminate in a paranoiac frenzy.

Indeed, “self-respectability [social standing] is not the same as self-respect [personal standing]. On the personality markets, emotions become ceremonial gestures by which the status is claimed, alienated from the inner feelings they supposedly express²⁴. Self-

²⁴ Dr. Adler's personality is so attached to his status as a medical doctor that he is no longer able to differentiate between his patients and his son. His emotions are dictated by his social status. “He behaved toward his son as he had formerly done toward his patients, and it was a great grief to Wilhelm”...“The doctor opened his small hand on the table in a gesture so old and so typical that Wilhelm felt it like an actual touch upon the foundations of his life.” (*Seize* 11/44)

estrangement is thus inherent in the fetishism of appearance.” (Mills 257) Ultimately, the type of successful white-collar which Wilhelm aspires to become is an individual capable of hiding his personal feelings, “his heart's ultimate needs” (*Seize* 118) in favour of the social appearance of success at least until sufficient wealth would allow him to indulge his personal desires. However, if Wilhelm has attempted on various occasions to hide his true nature, he is systematically overwhelmed by his own feelings. They pour out of him inadvertently, taking the form of “a speech difficulty” and various other “peculiarities” (*Seize* 23) which he cannot hide even whilst performing as an actor. Wilhelm cannot control himself and thus loses his self-respect. The more he tries to disguise himself, the more his particularities transpire and the more his lack of income becomes evident, the more he illusion of self-respectability becomes equally jeopardized.

Despite an overwhelming sentiment “that his routine was about to break up” (*Seize* 4), he remains fundamentally unaware of his peculiarities. During a conversation with his father, his erratic behaviour becomes so uncontrollable that his father wonders:

Why the devil can't he stand still when we're talking? He's either hoisting his pants up and down by the pockets or jittering his feet. A regular mountain of tics he's getting to be. ... Unaware of anything odd in his doing it, for he did it all the time, Wilhelm had pinched out the coal of his cigarette and dropped the butt in his pocket” (*Seize* 27/8)

Yet, despite an accumulation of self-hatred and regrets, Wilhelm maintains a painful inability to associate himself to the character that he displays to others. Whilst still at college, he already refutes Maurice Venice's professional opinion in order to cling on to the promise of stardom and the promise “to be freed from the anxious and narrow life of the average” (*Seize* 23). In his self-perception, Wilhelm is delusional. He compares himself to a hippopotamus – a semi-aquatic ambivalent and social animal – when “he more nearly resembled a bear” (*Seize* 23), a solitary predator. He is unable to communicate successfully with others and especially with figures of authority. He is so insecure that he cannot accept either criticism or advice and systematically persists in proving that his interlocutors misjudged him.

He wanted to start with the blessings of his family, but they were never given. He quarreled with his parents and his sister. And then, when he was best aware of the risks and knew a hundred reasons against going and had made himself sick with fear, he left home. This was typical of Wilhelm. After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had rejected innumerable times. Ten such decisions made up the history of his life. He had decided that it would be a bad mistake to go to Hollywood, and then he went. He had made up his mind not to marry his wife, but ran off and got married. He had resolved not to invest money with Tamkin, and then had given him a check. (*Seize* 23)

Wilhelm is in constant conflict with his peers and with himself. He aspires to free himself from social conventions, to detach himself from the species. “It was, he knew it was, his bid for liberty, Adler being in his mind the title of the species, Tommy the freedom of the person.” (*Seize* 25) Yet, he crucially lacks self-awareness and therefore, functions in a spirit of constant rebellion against the very image that he projects.

Furthermore, Wilhelm fundamentally lacks the social aptitudes which lead to success and assimilation in the white-collar society. To belong to the white-collar mass, one must be able to identify and promote his line of work, his social position, and crucially one must be capable of identifying himself amidst others. In such a social environment, a man's identity becomes his function – both privately and publicly,

the stress is on agility rather than ability, on 'getting along' in a context of associates, superiors, and rules, rather than 'getting ahead across an open market; on who you know rather than what you know; on techniques of self-display and the generalized knack of handling people, rather than moral integrity, substantive accomplishments, and solidity of person. (Mills 263)

Wilhelm is unable to thrive in such an environment precisely because he is unable to assimilate other's opinions and advice. His neurosis renders him unable to obey social protocol, therefore, annihilating his “moral integrity” and his “substantive accomplishments” in the public eye. Wilhelm's personality does not reflect itself in his public behaviour and consequently makes him an outcast – a misunderstood individual.

In an attempt to save himself, Wilhelm rebels against the current social organisation and idealised the past. However, his romantic idealisations rather than protecting him from

the aggression of the modern world make him really vulnerable to it. His overwhelming desire for absolute freedom affects his ability to adapt to the system and conflicts with his various duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, despite an allegiance to the past, Wilhelm dislikes the Protestant Ethic which was at the heart of American work culture at the beginning of the 20th century. Discussing the decline of the Protestant Ethic as a contributing factor in the rise of the corporate mindset, William H. Whyte argues in *The Organization Man* that this Ethic was still considered a building block of society at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Henry Clews, a banker who gave a speech to Yale students in 1908, the Protestant Ethic not only guarantees success and morality through hard work and competition, it promotes “survival of the fittest ... it rests to you to acquire the strength to climb to the top. ... [and] thrift: Form the habit ... of saving a part of your salary ... if you have a little money you can control circumstances” (Whyte 14-5). The Protestant Ethic promotes responsibilities as every man fends for himself and creates his own success. There is no sense of entitlement when one believes that only the fittest should survive and thrive. Wilhelm, who believes he “should have done hard labor ... hard honest labor that tires you” (Seize 7), rejects the reality of such doctrine and constantly blames others for his failure as a husband and as a corporate man:

A husband like me is a slave, with an iron collar. The churches go up to Albany and supervise the law. They won't have divorces. The court says, 'You want to be free. Then you have to work twice as hard – twice, at least! Work! You bum.' So then guys kill each other for the buck, and they may be free of a wife who hates them but they are sold to the company. The company knows a guy has got to have his salary, and takes full advantage of him. Don't talk to me about being free. A rich man may be free on an income of a million net. A poor man may be free because nobody cares what he does. But a fellow in my position has to sweat it out until he drops dead. (*Seize* 49)

Having lost his former illusions to ever be made “an officer of the corporation” (Seize 35) at Rojax company, Wilhelm realises that money is the true stem of social success and the only way to acquire true freedom. Before this downfall, Wilhelm had faith in the corporation

believing, as a man dedicated to his corporation, that “the goals of the individual and the goals of the corporation will work out to be one and the same” (Whyte 129). Wilhelm who maintains that he “was promised executive standing” (*Seize* 37) believed that the corporation functions as a family unit in which both parties seek the well-being and happiness of the other. Far from the Protestant Ethic which promotes individuality, Wilhelm argues that his dedication to Rojax alone should justify his promotion without the need for individual initiative. The blow comes when “they took a son-in-law into business – a new fellow” (*Seize* 35) who can seemingly demand and obtain a higher position without proving his dedication to the corporation. In Wilhelm's eyes, the son-in-law's incident exposes the immorality of the corporation destroying Wilhelm's faith in the process. Until this incident, Wilhelm has associated success and the promise of the good life with his allegiance to Rojax and to executive standing. The corporation is idealised in that it becomes responsible for your personal life in as much as your professional one. The dream becomes "a nice place out in the suburbs, a wife and three children, one, maybe two cars ... , and a summer place up at the lake ... it is not, seniors explain, the money that counts". (Whyte 71) The money becomes a means to an end in that context; the true corporate man pursues conformism even in his personal life. As a result, professional and personal life belongs to the corporation and once Wilhelm decides to quit his position at Rojax, his family becomes a burden for its existence reminds him constantly of the corporate ideal. The trap is cleverly constructed for if the executive does not equate success with wealth, Wilhelm's financial responsibilities towards his wife and children allows the corporation to take “full advantage of him” (*Seize* 49).

Unlike his father and other senior citizens who have succeeded in constructing their identity and therefore are able to enjoy the capitalist lifestyle, Wilhelm longs to reconstruct himself. In his desire to escape corporation, he becomes melancholic and indulges in remembrance of a glorified past. It becomes a refuge from the deviances of the present. He reminds himself of “Lovett's *British Poetry and Prose*” which contains “things [that] had

always swayed him” (*Seize* 13). He mystifies his former apartment as a peaceful oasis “with the sunlight pouring through the weave” forgetting “that that time had had its troubles, too” (*Seize* 43). Thus, “when Wilhelm recollects his more tranquil past, he creates a pastoral heaven away from the claustrophobic pressures of contemporary city-life ... Yet this moment of Romantic transcendence is only partial ... this imagined loss of peace in a previous paradise is just that – imagined. ... the Romantic imagination is kept in play alongside the harsh realities and contingencies of existence.” (Sandy 59). In modern times, there are no escapes other than financial wealth. Maladapted to society, misunderstood and isolated, Wilhelm constantly sways between a desire to escape the modern world and a willingness to outsmart the businessmen's government.

In a world obsessed with consumption and where “money making is aggression” (*Seize* 69) people almost exclusively strive to acquire enough wealth to finally distinguish themselves from the mass. “People come to the market to kill.” (*Seize* 69) As a result, “success for many has 'become an accidental and irrational event,' and as a goal has become so dazzling that the individual is absorbed in contemplating it, enjoying it vicariously.” (Mills 284) Such confusion inevitably leads to “a curious contradiction about the ethos of success in America today. On the one hand, there are still compulsion to struggle to 'amount to something'” (Mills 285) as Bellow implies in *Seize the Day*:

I should have done hard labor that tires he reflected. Hard honest labor that tires you out and makes you sleep. I'd have worked off my energy and felt better. Instead I have to distinguish myself – yet.” (*Seize* 7)

“On the other, there is a (sic) poverty of desire, a souring of the image of success.” (Mills 285). In that context, Wilhelm seeks wealth not to be successful but to be freed from social imperatives.

Furthermore, Wilhelm's motivation to distinguish himself and gain sufficient wealth does not constitute his life goal. His priority is family-oriented. Family ties are tremendously important to him and he succumbs to his ex-wife excessive demands for his children's sake.

“Oh, but my kids, Father. My kids. I love them. I don't want them to lack anything.” (*Seize* 46) His romantic idealisation of family ties render him particularly vulnerable, for he fails to understand that corporate America has developed as a substitute for the traditional family.

“Do you think the family is important to society? But the Big Bazaar feeds, clothes, amuses; it replaces families, in every respect but the single one of biological reproduction.” (Mills 167) If a consumerist society provides sufficient entertainment and commodities to give individuals a sense of completion, it demands a significant pecuniary contribution in return. Thus, if a minority can afford to live in a consumerist heaven which caters to their every needs, the majority are exploited by their desire to become part of the new family in which wealth holds the centre place. Wilhelm who is separated from his family pays the highest price for his wife demands that he pays “the Big Bazaar” (Mills 167) for her and the children whilst it never benefits him.

Wilhelm's financial downfall leads him to realise the darkest side of consumerism is the way that wealth alone builds characters: “It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. While if you didn't have it, you were a dummy, a dummy! You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth” (*Seize* 36). Thus, despite his appearance as a loser on the pecuniary front, Wilhelm appears to be aware of the dramatic changes in society which lead to the replacement of traditional values with consumerist ones. However, his vulnerability, his melancholic nature, and his desperate quest for an easy fix makes him an easy prey. Dr. Tamkin with his literary knowledge and his encouragement to express sensibility and feelings lures Wilhelm to the market. If on his own, Wilhelm increasingly appears as a pathetic individual who lacks self-confidence and cannot control his overwhelming sensibility, with Tamkin he becomes exhilarated. He reveals profound thoughts and an ability for self-analysis but proves unable to gain enough confidence to save himself. His visceral need for approval allows Tamkin to take advantage of him financially.

Despite his understanding of modern society as a soulless money-making

mechanism, Wilhelm finds himself unable to renounce to the promise of prestige associated with pecuniary success and thus remains part of the white-collar mass.

Since they have no public position, their private positions as individuals determine in what direction each of them goes; but as individuals they do not know where to go. So now they waver. They hesitate, confused and vacillating in their opinions, unfocused and discontinuous in their actions. They are worried and distrustful but, like so many others, they have no targets on which to focus their worry and distrust. (Mills 353)

As a result, those who, like Wilhelm, fail to maintain or increase their wealth become alienated from others. Amidst the crowd, they lose their identity and are condemned to find substitutes. They become dependent on external factors to rebuild an identity and they heavily rely on others to guide them through the businessmen's government. Unable to express themselves, they become experts in concealing their personal troubles in favour of mass-affiliation. Such dramatic changes in the foundations of society inevitably alters characters and people's ideas of self-fulfilment. Mills concludes his studies by arguing that “on the political market-place of American society, the new middle classes are up for sale; whoever seems respectable enough, strong enough, can probably have them. So far, nobody has made a serious bid.” (Mills 354) Ultimately, the social emphasis on prestige and wealth leads individuals to wish for successful assimilation to the mass. They are no longer able to stand for themselves for recognition only comes with employment and employment leads to identification with their company's philosophy, thus completing the vicious circle of mass-affiliation.

As such, Mill's detailed account of the changes which occurred in America at the time elaborates on the systematisation of identity and provides the frame in which to place David Riesman's study of the changing American Character, *The Lonely Crowd*, in relations to *Seize the Day*. Indeed, the two studies complement each other in that Mills focuses on the general public changes in society and their effects on character whereas Riesman offers a more detailed analysis of the character itself. In the remainder of this chapter, I will

demonstrate how the characterisation of *Seize the Day* coincides with Riesman's identification of three types of characters in the American society of the time. I will then assess how these particular characterisations denounce the subsequent loss of individuality which affects humanity in a mass society. Indeed, this new type of society which is masterly portrayed in *Seize the Day* challenge the concepts of freedom, authenticity and individuality at the heart of the American character. With his inability to conform, Wilhelm represents the struggle of the modern man who aspires to maintain his core values in a highly structured and anonymous society. It is only when he faces death that man once again remembers his humanity, yet as *The Victim* already suggested it may be too late. "How can a corporation die? One stockholder dies. The corporation lives." (*The Victim* 218) In his desire to create a strong social order, the American man has abandoned – so it seems, his capacity for self-governance and liberty? The American masculine seems to no longer uphold individuality as a threshold for success, corporation has replaced it.

Published in 1950, *The Lonely Crowd* is a best-seller²⁵ sociological study which analyses the correlation between cultural characters and their societies. It identifies three major types of characters which correspond to three different social organisations, the tradition-directed, the inner-directed, and the other-directed. David Riesman argues that the exponential growth of mass regulated corporate and governmental organizations triggered an unprecedented change in the American character. Mass media, mass consumption and social mobility allow for a wider social environment to which individuals must adapt on an everyday basis. These changes redefine the social structure and give "way to another sort of revolution – a whole range of social developments associated with a shift from an age of

²⁵ *The Lonely Crowd* appeared in 1953 as one of the first quality paperbacks issued by Doubleday Anchor Books, it became a best-seller. It has sold 1.4 million copies, more than any book of sociology before or since. It put Riesman on the cover of *Time* magazine and inserted "the lonely crowd" (a term invented by the publishers, which does not appear in the book) into the language. That phrase lived long enough to get into a 1967 Bob Dylan lyric.

production to an age of consumption.” (Riesman 20-1) A society which relies on a steady consumption of mass produced goods demands a high level of conformity and causes the individual to compare himself to others. In such a society, there is a high need for approval and recognition by peers. The post-war abundance of goods and the rise of modern bureaucracy create a new type of character, willing to fit into the new social order and to define himself as a member of a crowd rather than as an autonomous individual.

In his study, Mills associates what Riesman calls the other-directed character to the white-collar people:

The white-collar people slipped quietly into modern society. Whatever history they have had is a history without events; whatever common interests they have do not lead to unity; whatever future they have will not be of their own making. If they aspire at all it is to a middle course, at a time when no middle course is available, and hence to an illusory course in an imaginary society. Internally they are split, fragmented; externally, they are dependent on larger forces. ... As a group, they do not threaten anyone, as individuals, they do not practice an independent way of life. (Mills IX)

Similarly, the other-directed character seeks approval in a world which no longer offers a sense of direction and tradition. To illustrate this point, Riesman compares the other-directed character to two other prototypes, the tradition-directed and the inner-directed. Their differences are unequivocal. Tradition-directed individuals follow predetermined and inherited set of rules and share a highly structure cultural life with their peers. They are tightly connected to a community in which they have “a well-defined functional relationship to other members of the group.” (Riesman 26) Their identity and role is defined early in their development thus making their society slow to evolve. If individual talents can be encouraged, the cultural heritage nevertheless rhythms daily life.

On the contrary, inner-directed types appear in quick-paced societies which demand a high level of social and methodological adaptation. If society offers a vast array of choice to the inner-directed individuals, they nevertheless remain “bound by traditions: they limit his ends and inhibit his choice of means.” (Riesman 31) Thus, the inner-directed type is a

transitional character. He maintains rigid rules often learnt in childhood as to what constitutes an acceptable lifestyle, whilst retaining the ability to adapt to fast-evolving environments. Unlike the tradition-directed type who does not experience alternative lifestyles, the inner-directed must learn to maintain “a delicate balance between the demands upon him of his life goal and the buffetings of his external environment.” (Riesman 32) Typically, the inner-directed character is not easily distracted from his life goal and uses society as means to an end. He does not seek constant approval.

A constant need for approval characterises the other-directed type. Typically, his behaviour is influenced by 'information cascade,' his personal tastes are overridden by his 'herd instinct'. In a society which constantly thrives on novelties, the other-directed type constantly reinvents himself in light of his contemporaries. He internalised external signals and as a result “the goal toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life.” (Riesman 37) As such, the other-directed character is attractive to the modern capitalist system for it demonstrates “an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others ... While all people want and need to be liked ... it is only the other-directed types who make this their chief source of direction and chief area of sensitivity.” (Riesman 38) Tradition and autonomy which were the core values of tradition-directed and inner-directed individuals respectively become secondary to the other-directed types who value social acceptance more than individuality.

Furthermore, “as a result of industrialization and colonization, ... character types that would have been well adapted to their situation find themselves under pressure from newer, better-adapted types.” (Riesman 50) Such pressures on the core values of one's identity produce individuals who are “unable to adapt because they lack the proper receiving equipment.” (Riesman 50) The expansion of the middle class and the rapid increase in wealth and consumerism during the 1950s create tensions in individuals who fail to adapt to

their environment. Riesman's title for his study, *The Lonely Crowd*, highlights the challenges which a society composed by a variety of different types faces – a propensity to over-conform to an inescapable social imperative.

In *Seize the Day*, the population encompasses various aspects which Riesman links to the other-directed type. The study argues that the “other-directed [type] seems to be emerging in very recent years in the upper middle class of our large cities: more prominently in New York.” (Riesman 34) In *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm experiences a personal meltdown which is triggered by his return to New York. Looking for guidance, Wilhelm joins his father who lives in a hotel only to realise that the old man has changed dramatically in the past years. “Dad is no longer the same person ... Had he lost his family sense?” (*Seize* 11) Now living publicly, Dr. Adler maintains superficial relationships in which he is “idolized by everyone” (*Seize* 11) in the hotel. In such an environment, the traditional boundaries between private and public life are blurred. His relationships are mainly business related and involved “the clerks, the elevator operators, the telephone girls and waitresses and chambermaids, the management” (12) Familial ties are non-existent as older people live amongst themselves and pay strangers to cater to their every needs.

Wilhelm who notices the dramatic changes in his father's behaviour becomes “profoundly bitter that his father should speak to him with such detachment about his welfare.²⁶” and wishes to encounter “old ladies who knitted and cooked and looked after their grandchildren.” (*Seize* 10/91). Desperate to find his place, Wilhelm once again idealises the past and caricatures behaviours. His desire for tradition renders him unable to comprehend the changes in social organisation. However, privileged retired men and women

²⁶ Before retirement, Dr. Adler's description corresponds to the inner-directed. A successful doctor, he has spent his working life providing for his family. He had not objected to give his children what they desire (daughter and pencils) but now aspires to live in conformity with the people at the hotel. He has detached himself from the closed family circle to embrace a larger social entity. His refusal to help his son is particularly telling, for as the other retired people, Dr. Adler aspires to spoil himself with his hard earned money. His ability to do so has become part of his personality.

have certainly embraced the other-directed lifestyle. As they no longer belong to the sphere of work, their lifestyle is entirely oriented towards leisure and consumption and as Dr. Adler's need for idolatry highlights they have adapted to seek validation in others.

Thus, they all crowd the same area of the city “along Broadway in the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties” (*Seize* 4) where they spend their days hopping from shops to shops, from a bakery to a club room, to gossip and socialise and ultimately, maintain their public identity. Wilhelm who “felt out of place” among “New York's vast population of old men and women” (*Seize* 4) notices how their behaviour diverges from the traditional vision of elderly people. Living amongst themselves, without familial or mundane duties, they spend their time socialising in a restricted area of the city. If their behaviour suggests a desire to conform, it is dictated by peer-pressure rather than by tradition.

One of the most telling examples in the narrative takes place as Wilhelm goes for lunch with Dr. Tamkin.

The ate in the cafeteria with the gilded front. There was the same art inside as outside. The food looked sumptuous. Whole fishes were framed like pictures with carrots, and the salads were like terraced landscapes or like Mexican pyramids; slices of lemon and onion and radishes were like sun and moon and stars; the cream pies were about a foot thick and the cakes swollen as if sleepers had baked them in their dreams. (*Seize* 91)

This level of refinement and choice illustrates “the changes in the symbolic meaning of food” which occurred when “the other-directed person of the mid-twentieth century in America ... puts on display his taste ... Today, in wide circles, many people are and many more feel that they must be gourmets.” (Riesman 168-9) Food is no longer regarded as a strict necessity but rather as an opportunity to align one's personal taste with these of others. It is a public display far from Wilhelm's remembrance. “Wilhelm's grandmother had dressed him in a sailor suit and danced him on her knee, blew on the porridge for him and said, 'Admiral, you must eat.’” (*Seize* 91). Here food is simple and functional and the grandmother is idealised. The setting and entertainment construct a bond between the child and his

grandmother whilst food is considered a necessity rather than an indulgence. What is emphasised is the grandmother's effort to entertain and feed the child, as a true caregiver, the welfare of the child is her sole reward. Her role defines her and does not necessitate other's approval. Her role is traditional.

In the other-directed society, however, food is embellished and spectacular. One publicly displays one's tastes to connect with likely minded peers. The abundance of ingredients forces the consumer to choose and that choice "among foods need therefore no longer be made on the basis either of tradition or of Malthusian limits." (Riesman 169) It becomes a choice which attests of one's social position and defines the individual within a social group. In that particular cafeteria, food symbolizes monetary abundance and a capacity for indulgence. The salads are as big as "pyramids", the cakes and pies "thick" and "swollen" and the display is artful rather than efficient. In such a setting, eating becomes a commitment rather than a necessity. One takes time to eat and relax, there is a tremendous attention to details in the display and the cafeteria boasts "the same art inside as outside" (*Seize* 91). The primary function of the eatery has become secondary to its social function. The act of eating demonstrates one's social status and allows like-minded people to identify with one another and ultimately to identify themselves.

The shift becomes even more evident when compared to a similar episode in *The Victim*. *The Victim* is also set in New York and contains an episode in which Leventhal enters a cafeteria. The cafeteria, however, rather than reinforcing the humanistic and artistic concerns of the protagonists, appears highly functional, minimalist, almost mechanical – soulless. "Behind the steam tables, one set of white-lettered menu boards was hauled down and another sent up in the steel frame with a clash. ... On all sides there were long perspectives of black-topped tables turned on an angle to appear diamond-shaped, each with its symmetrical cluster of sugar, salt, pepper, and napkin box. From end to end their symmetry put a kind of motion into the almost empty place." (*The Victim* 111). Here, food is

not visible, the choice is limited to a menu and each table displays an identical set of spices. The choice of material, from the “green tiles floor” (101) to the “steel frame” and the “black-topped tables” suggests an industrial and anonymous approach to catering whilst the geometrical display – “frame”, “angle” “diamond-shaped” “symmetrical cluster” – reinforces the idea of an industrial environment. Leventhal chooses his sandwich as mechanically as he completes every other aspects of the transaction. He takes a tray, “pull a check from the machine,” orders a simple sandwich, a “Swiss on rye” which is then sent “across the counter with a spin and a rattle” (*The Victim* 111). As opposed to the cafeteria in *Seize the Day*, no one lingers around to gossip, the only persons present are “some of the employees sat smoking, looking toward the sunlight and the street” (111) – an attitude which suggests boredom and a desire to escape the premises. Their aim is not to socialise nor to find direction in their job – they are functional individuals. Thus, in that instance, the cafeteria fulfils a very precise role – to provide sustenance, rapidly and efficiently. Unlike in *Seize the Day*, no one identifies with the establishment, its purpose is purely functional and does not contribute to the process of self-definition. As such, the discrepancy between both cafeterias and their respective customers testify of the evolution of social practice between the two episodes.

In *Seize the Day*, the cafeteria is the attraction. People gather there to exhibit their taste and measure to others. Social interactions are superficial. “The old people idled and gossiped over their coffee.” (91) What defines them is not their individuality but the overall leisurely and decadent atmosphere in which they choose to exhibit themselves. The female exhibition is particularly extravagant and denotes a certain grotesque component which is completely in opposition with traditional roles.

The elderly ladies were rouged and mascaraed and hennaed and used blue hair rinse and eye shadow and wore costume jewelry, and many of them were proud and stared at you with expressions that did not belong to their age. (*Seize* 91)

Their behaviour supposes a change of character which occurs at the expense of tradition. It suggests that older people, and women especially, abandoned their traditional role in favour of their new other-directed character. They are no longer maternal figures who once provided basic necessities to their family. Instead of knitting, cooking, babysitting, they overcrowd the social space. They have become consumers who have the luxury of time. They can enjoy idleness – a luxury which Wilhelm who is desperate “to go back” to the market (*Seize* 98) cannot afford.

Furthermore, in an attempt to fit into the crowd, the older ladies display “expressions that did not belong to their age” (*Seize* 91). Their behaviour conveys sexual innuendoes, they are lavishly dressed and made-up, “rouged and mascaraed and hennaed” as if to seduce. Their outrageous make-up and their proud attitude suggest that as the other-directed crowd, these women look “to sex not for display but for a test of his or her ability to attract” (Riesman 174). Their role is no longer defined and they must attract to belong. Their self-definition depends on others. Unlike the individuals in a tradition-directed society, they “lack a well-defined functional relationship to other members of the group.” (Riesman 26) Rather than fulfilling traditional roles, older people now “crowd the shops and cafeterias, the dime stores, the tearooms, the bakeries, the beauty parlors, the reading rooms and club rooms.” (*Seize* 4) thus playing an active part in the sustainability of the monetary system in which they evolve. Their family has become “the Big Bazaar [who] feeds, clothes, amuses” (Mills 167). Their value is no longer in their ability to provide for their kin but in their ability to sustain the system by constantly adjusting to the group. Overall, their behaviour suggests a strong need to correspond to and identify with their peers and by constantly referring to others for guidance, their individuality becomes non-existent.

This type of behaviour distresses Wilhelm for he seeks self-definition. His quest for understanding himself and finding a way to successfully function in society is what defines him throughout the narrative. Self-definition is not what defines the other-directed mass. On

the contrary, as the elderly crowd highlights with its behaviour, its concern is primarily with affiliation. They copy one another in order to identify with the mass, thus losing individuality. Wilhelm, who seeks to experience himself fully cannot identify with such behaviours. However, estranged from his relatives and without sufficient funds, Wilhelm cannot afford to expose his individuality either. Therefore, he seeks someone who understand him and with whom he can expose his differences freely. If most people in the cafeterias are satisfied with mere gossip, Wilhelm is transported by Tamkin's "lengthy discussion" (*Seize* 91) despite its significant lack of direction.

Wilhelm's conversation with Dr Tamkin confuses rather than concludes and does not offer any clear-cut opinions or argumentation. On the contrary, the conversation has no logical frame and oscillates between truth and lies. Yet it remains the closer thing to a truthful and profound connection that Wilhelm experiences.

And Tamkin, the *confuser* of the imagination, began to tell, or to *fabricate*, the strange history of his father. 'Because of unhappiness, at a certain age, the brain starts to die back.' (True, true! thought Wilhelm) 'Twenty years later I was doing experiments in Eastman Kodak, Rochester, and I found the old fellow. He had five more children.' (False, false!) (*Seize* 93 emphasis mine)

Throughout, Tamkin seems to be playing a role to connect to Wilhelm. The veracity of his stories is never obvious and cannot be verified. However, Wilhelm clings on to it for Tamkin is the only person with whom a discussion can be held. Simultaneously, Tamkin seems desperate to connect to his peer and his primary purpose is never revealed clearly.

Tamkin's behaviour highlights his other-directed character which "obliged [him] to conciliate or manipulate a variety of people. ... This diversity of roles to be taken with a diversity of customers is not institutionalized or clear cut, and the other-directed person tends to become merely his succession of roles and encounters and hence to doubt who he is or where he is going." (Riesman 165). During his conversation with Wilhelm, Tamkin assumes different roles – he appears as a friend, a psychologist, a confidant – and overall achieves an

incoherent discourse. His personality constantly adapts to his listener. It constantly oscillates between statements which Wilhelm deeply relates to – “true” and others which he dismisses as grotesque and whimsical– “false”. Thus, despite the psychological link between Tamkin and Wilhelm, their relationship does not help Wilhelm to overcome his identity crisis. On the contrary, it exacerbates his romantic notions, accelerates his paranoid frenzy and his ultimate downfall.

In comparison, the conversation which takes place in *The Victim's* cafeteria is composed of clearly defined opinions on a precise subject: human nature²⁷. It is not simple gossip designed to unified the participants, nor does it refer to anyone's private life as Tamkin's father and son theme does. On the contrary, people express their opinions and even disagree without challenging their self-definition. Their discussion can be considered a philosophical debate, for opinions are discussed abstractly. Opinions are challenged and only Leventhal who considers himself as a victim cannot distance his self-definition from how people judge his ideas. Thus, when he is accused to succumb “to all the things that are said against us” (*Victim* 112) he gives “notice by the drop of his voice that he intended to say no more.” (112) Unlike others, Leventhal identifies himself with external opinions, yet this practice is not accepted by his peers. To them, a discussion is a pure exchange of ideas. What defines them is their respective humanity and their desire to accept it in full. Reunited at a birthday party, their initial discussion finally draws to an end.

Here I'm sitting here, and my mind can go around the world. Is there any limit to what I can think? But in another minute I can be dead, on this spot. There's a limit to me. But I have to be myself in full. Which is somebody who dies, isn't it? That's what I am from the beginning. I'm not three people, four people. I was born once and I will die once. You want to be two people? More than human? Maybe it's because you don't know how to be one. Everybody is busy. Every man turns himself into a whole corporation to handle the business. So one stockholder is riding in the

²⁷“Tell me, please, what is human? And really we study people so much now that after we look and look at human nature – I write science articles myself – after you look at it and weight it and turn it over and put it under a microscope, you might say, 'What is all the shouting about?' A man is nothing, his life is nothing.” (*The Victim* 113).

elevator, and another one is on the roof looking through a telescope, one is eating candy, and one is in the movies looking at pretty faces. Who is left? And how can a corporation die? One stockholder dies. The corporation lives and goes on eating and riding the elevator and looking at the pretty face. (*Victim* 217-8)

At first rather obscure, this diatribe offers an intense criticism of the state of humanity, particularly the American masculine experience as the discussion is held strictly between men. According to Schlossberg, by separating himself from his mortality, man has lost touch with his natural state and can no longer live an authentic life. Rather than developing his unique personality by committing to an activity, man seeks constant entertainment and loses his individuality in the process – his humanity.

This corporate identity corresponds to the leitmotif of the other-directed crowd who constantly seek self-definition in others. Thus, the differences between the two conversations highlight the evolution in character that took place at the time. Indeed, from an individual concern with the nature of existence and the quest for being exactly human, society has transformed in *Seize the Day* into a mass overwhelmingly concerned with ideas of affiliation and belonging.

To reinforce the parallel between Dr. Tamkin and the other-directed character, the doctor shows to the table “with a tray piled with plates and cups. He had Yankee pot roast, purple cabbage, potatoes, a big slice of watermelon, and two cups of coffee.” (*Seize* 91) Dr. Tamkin who in appearance chooses a diversity of ingredients, actually selects staples of the traditional American diet. The simplicity of Tamkin's food choice echoes “conventional conventions ... the uniform menu of steak or chicken, potatoes, and marbled peas.” (Riesman 169). Despite the diversity on offer, Tamkin settles for traditional ingredients which in turn reflect Wilhelm's desire for conventions. In doing so, he actually relates to the other-directed character for

what is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual – either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted,

through friends and through the mass media. This source is of course 'internalized' in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. (Riesman 37)

Tamkin wishes to relate to Wilhelm and his strong connection to an idealised past. Their reciprocal involvement in the commodity market only functions as long as Wilhelm relates to Tamkin to the point of dependency.

To achieve this, Tamkin does not hesitate to manipulate Wilhelm with unlikely revelations. Yet, the revelations do not secure Wilhelm's trust. On the contrary, they make Wilhelm doubtful.

Tamkin was a charlatan, and furthermore he was desperate. ... And Wilhelm realized that he was on Tamkin's back. It made him feel that he had virtually left the ground and was riding upon the other man. ... The doctor, if he was a doctor, did not look anxious. But then his face did not have much variety ... When his hypnotic spell failed, his big underlip made him look weak-minded. (*Seize* 96).

Wilhelm is never fully convinced of Tamkin's reliability; he constantly doubts his honesty yet remains strongly attracted to the man. The main reasons behind Wilhelm's behaviour are an overwhelming feeling of loneliness and a strong attraction to the sublime. If Wilhelm seeks comfort in an idealised past, he is simultaneously desperate to prove himself. "Instead, I had to distinguish myself – yet." (*Seize* 7). Thus, Wilhelm follows Tamkin in an attempt to regain his former position. Yet, if he is swayed by Tamkin's discourse, he nevertheless remains sceptical, for ultimately his desires are not that of the other-directed crowd.

Unlike the other characters depicted in the novel, Wilhelm is neither other nor inner-directed. He resents his father who sacrificed his family life in favour of his career. "Dad never was a pal to me when I was young, he reflected. He was at the office or the hospital, or lecturing." (*Seize* 14) Simultaneously, he feels alienated in his contacts with others for at the hotel - "everyone was so busy and contacts were so brief and had such a small weight" (13). Wilhelm is desperate to retain his traditional sense of family and relationship. Despite his antagonistic relationship to his father, he seeks a familial tie that no longer exists. Dr. Adler

“behaved toward his son as he had formerly done toward his patients, and it was a great grief to Wilhelm; it was almost too much to bear. ... Had he lost his family sense?” (11). Wilhelm strongly believes in his patriarchal role and cannot resist his ex-wife's demands. “I've got to pay premiums on two policies for the boys” (*Seize* 45). His traditional vision of fatherhood renders him unable to refuse his ex-wife's demands. “In society in which tradition-direction is the dominant mode of insuring conformity, relative stability is preserved in part by the infrequent but highly important process of fitting into institutionalized roles such deviants as there are.” (Riesman 27) Wilhelm insists in remaining involved in his children's life because he perceives it as his primordial duty. He has a traditional vision of family and seeks comfort in his peers yet for undisclosed reasons he finds himself unable to remain married to his wife and therefore, abandons his family.

However, his longing for a traditional, uncomplicated lifestyle where everyone has a predetermined role cannot be considered fully tradition-directed, for his society rejects such ideas in favour of a consumerist lifestyle. Despite himself, Wilhelm cannot escape the other-directed lifestyle. On the one hand, he claims: “I miss the country. There's too much push here for me”, I should have done “hard honest labor” (*Seize* 7) whilst on the other, he remains in the heart of the city to make money for his ex-wife as “a slave, with an iron collar.” (*Seize* 49). His unemployment could have led him to follow his desire for hard labor in the countryside – a traditional and simple lifestyle, but his desire for recognition, his willingness to distinguish himself in the eyes of his father and sons leads him to depend on the market and on Tamkin and ultimately on the other-directed character.

Additionally, his attraction to Tamkin derives from his unsatisfactory relationship with his father and his fundamental need for patriarchal guidance. “At least Tamkin sympathizes with me and tries to give me a hand, whereas Dad doesn't want to be disturbed.” (*Seize* 11) Tamkin acts throughout the narrative as a surrogate father to Wilhelm. And to secure his position, he indulges in sentimental overflows and promises easy solutions to

Wilhelm's problems. Unlike Dr. Adler's scientific approach to his son's difficulties, Dr. Tamkin encourages Wilhelm's sentimentality in an effort to manipulate him on the financial plan. His true purpose is indeed monetary for he cannot come to terms with others making easy money on the market. "I confess to you I can't. I think about people, just because they have a few bucks to invest, making fortunes. They have no sense, they have no talent, they just have extra dough ... With all this money around you don't want to be a fool while everyone else is making." (*Seize* 9) Tamkin with his endless tales of extraordinary achievements certainly seems to possess sense and talent. What Tamkin lacks therefore is enough liquidity to make a short-term purchase on the market and finally become a member of the financial elite.

His background as a psychologist helps him to convince Wilhelm of his scientific approach to the market, yet his self-control is a myth: "I get so worked up and tormented and restless, so restless!" (*Seize* 9). On the contrary, Tamkin's true purpose is to use Wilhelm's money in an attempt to enhance his personal wealth. Wilhelm who several times suspects Tamkin of unreliability nevertheless listens to him for he is a self-confessed "sucker for people who talk about the deeper things of life" (*Seize* 69). In his relationship with Tamkin, Wilhelm seeks a connection with the past, with the traditional lifestyle which he holds in high esteem. Tamkin's concerns with Wilhelm's troubles and his empathy towards him gives Wilhelm a sense of emotional guidance and the illusion to be part of something.

Wilhelm particularly appreciates their common interest in literature, more precisely in British Romantic Poetry. However, their interest in the art is antagonistic. Tamkin dwells in the negative thematic of "a picture of the world as 'a kind of purgatory' populated by 'poor human beasts,' a description which seems tailored to Wilhelm's experience ... Wilhelm maintains his intention to find tenderness and kindness. His quest amounts simply to an effort to reaffirm man's humanity, to restore an idea of dignity to the human race and his intention is both reflected and parodied in one of Tamkin's poems." (Galloway 242) Wilhelm

seeks the sublime, he wishes to transcend his current condition and the world he inhabits to experience unconditional love. However, as he experiences in the metro, this feeling is imagined and cannot be sustained.

And in the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat, and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth, all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and his sisters. ... a few minutes later he didn't feel anything like a brother toward the man who sold him the tickets?" (*Seize* 85)

Wilhelm's obsession with unconditional love has already destroyed his marriage for despite the apparent stability of the union (Dr. Adler, the scientist, is persuaded that his wife wants him back) and his ability to maintain a bachelor pad, Wilhelm insists that he "left Margaret because he had to" (*Seize* 51) and it seems that he had to because he was seeking a new passion with another girl. Despite his sentimentality and a desire to lead a good honest life, Wilhelm cannot accept to remain at the mercy of others and constantly seeks to overcome his current social position. Unlike his father who maintains that he "stayed at home and took care of [his] children" (50) despite Wilhelm's recollection of an absent father and had a successful career, Wilhelm becomes marginalised for he is unable to sustain his desire in a constructive manner. He wants to be a father but refuses to compromise his freedom for the sake of his children, he seeks traditions but leaves his wife and job. As such, it appears that Wilhelm does not possess the ability to accept any forms of sacrifices.

From the beginning, it is clear that Wilhelm faces several oppositions which together form the core of the narrative and challenge his sense of self. Indeed, Wilhelm who has left his former successful job for what he calls "a question of morale" (*Seize* 37), now battles external pressures which challenge his sense of self – his authenticity. Throughout the narrative, Wilhelm battles external pressures, he attempts somewhat ridiculously to retain his own system of beliefs. "It was a matter of sheer hope, because there was not much that he could add to his present effort." (*Seize* 1) The satirical overtone of Wilhelm's battle to

reinvent himself is manifested through the discrepancy between Wilhelm's emotional and material needs. His relationship with both diametrically opposed doctors Dr. Adler and Dr. Tamkin illustrates Wilhelm's neurosis. His relationship with his father, Dr. Adler, demonstrates Wilhelm's inability to approach his current situation rationally. From the beginning onwards, it is clear that father and son inhabit "an entirely different world" as Dr. Adler sums up: "My son and I use different monickers. I uphold tradition. He's for the new." (*Seize* 11;14). Wilhelm's change of name is a reminiscence of his past attempt to become an actor; an enterprise which led him to rebel against his familial tradition.

At the time, Wilhelm, a twenty-something, foolishly tries to emancipate himself from his father. "It was, he knew it was, his bid for liberty, Adler being in his mind, the title of the species, Tommy the freedom of the person. But Wilky was his inescapable self." (*Seize* 25). This portrayal of filial disobedience inscribes itself in "the Emersonian cult of self-invention – the second chance, the makeover, the new start. ... Like *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Billy Budd*, *Seize the Day* is full of the gloom of failed father – son relations." (Frank 75-6) Wilhelm's rebellion, more than a cry for liberty is a cry for individuality. Willing to leave the old ways behind, Wilhelm wishes to reinvent himself entirely, to stand for himself, liberated from his forefathers' inheritance. By rebelling against his familial tradition, "he was to be freed from the anxious and narrow life of the average." (*Seize* 23). If Wilhelm's leap of faith seems at first harmless, his determination to follow Venice's shallow promise of wealth and fame leads him to refuse Venice "quick about-face" after the unconvincing screen shots.

Furthermore, the surname 'Venice' reinforces the water imagery which transcends the novel as it echoes the city of Venice – the sinking city. Wilhelm's decision triggers his slow descent into instability. In *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman places the apparition of a new type of individual in the 1940s, the time around which Wilhelm must have joined Hollywood. Riesman explains that the shift in cultural values which occurred after the Depression created "other-directed" individuals. "The other-directed person wants to be

loved rather than esteemed,” not necessarily to control others but to relate to them. Unlike Joseph in *Dangling Man* who wants to have a purposeful life or Leventhal in *The Victim* whose idea of success it to assimilate a corporate identity, Wilhelm dreams of being recognised, celebrated even: “In one jump, the world knows who you are. ... You become a lover to the whole world. ... One fellow smiles, a billion people also smile.” (*Seize* 22) Wilhelm is incapable of satisfying himself with anonymity and as a result, wealth represents to him the key to his own identity and he cannot resist the promise of an easy fix.

Thus, his willingness to succeed as an actor with Venice or as a stockbroker with Dr. Tamkin reflects a desire for wealth rather than for a true quest for the self. He believes in both men's discourse because he does not know who he is and seeks the appraisal of others. As such, Wilhelm becomes a satirical character, a hollow man who reflects the problems of his time:

Introspection, self-knowledge, hypochondria, so solemnly treated in the modern tradition, are here the subject of humor. The novelist enjoys laughing at himself, as he does at others. The inner life, the 'unhappy consciousness,' the management of personal life, 'alienation' – all the sad questions for which the late romantic writers reserved a special tone of disappointment and bitterness are turned inside-out by the modern comedian. Deeply subjective self-concern is ridiculed. My feeling, my early traumas, my moral seriousness, my progress, my sensitivity, my fidelity, my guilt – the modern [read contemporary] reader is easily made to laugh at all of these. (Fuchs 81)

What makes this text satirical is not exclusively Wilhelm's constant self-concern, nor his quest for “something big. Truth, like” but rather the abusive treatment of such concerns in the modern corporate world that Wilhelm inhabits. Wilhelm's sensibility is ridiculous only because Dr. Tamkin succeeds in abusing it for monetary purposes. Thus, it is not the quest for the individual, for self-acceptance, or authenticity which is decried in *Seize the Day* but rather the corporate setting which does not allow for men to explore their individual identity. The influence of the corporation on personal life is limitless. It extends beyond the professional realm by promoting a lifestyle and values which deny individuality. As Wilhelm

realises with his missed promotion, "there is a conflict between the individual as he is and wishes to be, and the role he is called upon to play" (Whyte 142). The affiliation with the corporation remains part of Wilhelm's personality long after he quits his position at Rojax, for his family for which he will be responsible for life is englobed in the corporate lifestyle. In the final scene, as Wilhelm enters the funeral parlor during his desperate quest for Tamkin, he finds himself facing the inescapable reality of the corporate life in the corporate appearance of the dead man. "On the surface, the dead man with his formal shirt and his tie and silk lapels and his powdered skin looked so proper; only a little beneath so – black, Wilhelm thought, so fallen in the eyes". (Seize 117) Individuality is denied and masked by accessories designed to make the corpse look "proper" (117), socially acceptable. Wilhelm strongly identifies with the dead man for he feels that his individuality is similarly buried under pretences: "Wilhelm experiences not just universal human alienation, but alienation from his labor; he renounces not just the general corrupted nature of human activity but the corrupting influences of accumulated capital, which makes domineering behavior much easier to enact." (Eichelberger 79) Alienated from his role as a father and husband, unable to self-govern, he constantly objectifies himself in an attempt to be praised for his individuality yet his values as an individual find no echoes in a world obsessed in turn by corporate standard and wealth. The corporation becomes "the devil who wants my life" (*Seize* 117). Yet, what truly happens to Wilhelm as he witnesses the irrevocable ending of life and the absurdity of "his heart's ultimate needs in a finite world remains vague and mysterious. The inescapable fate of mankind is revealed to him in a moment of desperate needs and Wilhelm sinks deeper into despair yet unlike the corpse, his life will continue in all its absurd reality. Wilhelm whose beliefs are neither spiritual nor in line with contemporary images of masculinity truly touches the meaninglessness and singularity of his existence at that moment. Ending in Bellow's novels are famously vague and in Wilhelm's case the mystery reveals, in its absurdity, the need to create one's life for one's self. Tamkin has disappeared

and Wilhelm who thought that he was finally understood realises the extent of his alienation. As a result, Wilhelm's absurd persona and his struggle with identity and sense of belonging denounce the loss of American masculine identity in favour of mass-affiliation to the corporate world. Morale and personal beliefs have been disregarded in the never-ending quest for the social prestige. As a result, *Seize the Day's* focus on wealth as a marker of identity illustrates the culmination of the modern values at the heart of the capitalist urban society.

7. Conclusion

Altogether this analysis demonstrates how Bellow explores the quest for a new American masculine identity in postwar America. In the contextual parts, I have focused on the notions of identity and individuality which closely relate each of the novels with Existentialism. If the episodic nature of the identity crisis suffered by each of the protagonists respectively is typical of existentialist novels, the second part of the contextualisation which has highlighted the crucial role of women in each of the novels has allowed to develop the thematic into the socio-cultural domain. Indeed, in *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*, the existentialist quest for human identity and individual responsibilities is entwined with the evolution of the social organisation to accommodate consumerism, the rise of conformist culture and the changes in gender politics. Studied together, the three novels illustrate the shift in the American masculine character during the postwar years and offer a unique vision of the cultural evolution of the social perception of masculinity from heroism to domestication.

The focus in each of the novels on the feelings of despair, isolation, and guilt which accompany each protagonist's inability to maintain their identity together with their inability to assume a determined social role certainly justifies the association between *Dangling Man*, *The Victim*, *Seize the Day* and Existentialism. From the absurdity which Joseph's experiences as he dangles and the sense of being an impostor which pursues Leventhal to the culmination in Wilhelm's inability to maintain a sense of identity, each of the three novels certainly reflects the existentialist concern with individuality and responsibilities. However, unlike purely existentialists texts, each of these novels is simultaneously concerned with the evolution of the social organisation and the socio-cultural effects that such a rapid evolution has on masculine individuality.

For many years, the American man was self-sufficient and self-governed with

ingrained belief in his right for prosperity and for social and territorial liberty. As such, the idealised male was fundamentally hyper-masculine and unburdened with sentimentality. Opposed to any feminine traits, his identity was primarily associated with symbols of virility, individuality and courage both in the private and the public sphere. After World War II, the perception of masculinity changes dramatically in America to accommodate the newly emerging corporate world and the consumer marketplace as portrayed in *Seize the Day*.

In *Dangling Man*, *The Victim* and *Seize the Day*, Bellow explores this particular evolution of social organisation by depicting the American masculine experience in transition. If the concern remains on the devaluation of individuality and the quest for redemption, the evolution of social circumstances between the three novels demonstrate the struggle of the individual man in face of social forces increasingly opposed to individuality.

Between 1944 and 1956, the shift to a consumerist society demanded

the absorption of many individuals into very large organizations, business, industries, and colleges. Individuals were expected to accept the company line because the company, with all of its collective wisdom, really knew what was best. What followed was a further erosion of individualism and the establishment of a conforming and standardizing atmosphere. (Dubbert 242).

In that context, the necessity of engagement in order to maintain individuality no longer represents a personal quest but turns into a state of revolt against social forces at play. The emerging social order demands assimilation and masculine success becomes increasingly dependent on the “marketing mentality” (Mills 182). Consequently, it forces the individual man to abandon his quest for personal meaning in favour of a ready-made scheme which follows corporate guidelines. This new order not only rejects heroism as a formative vector of the American masculine identity by renouncing “the code of the athlete, of the tough boy” (*Dangling* 1) it also redefines masculinity to encourage submission and mass-affiliation.

If *Dangling Man* still displays a vision of masculinity closely linked to heroism, in

The Victim and *Seize the Day*, Bellow focuses on the sentiment of victimisation, the feeling of being an impostor and guilt which accompany the emergence of a more domesticated vision of American masculinity. If Bellow's protagonists all “desire a kind of liberation from the conflicts and the confines of their present lives, a desire that imbues their narratives with an existential undercurrent” (McKinley 129) they systematically have to abandon individuality as they fail to assert their desires in a world which increasingly controls the individual in favour of mass culture. As a result of these rapid changes which are intensified in all three novels by the absence of the women, Joseph, Leventhal, and Wilhelm fail to hold true to their fundamental values and suffer from alienation as a result of their inability to resist external pressures. Despite their ability to understand their situation, they cannot help but objectify themselves for they are never offered a real alternative nor do they possess the strength to self-govern. Within an urban context, professional life becomes the single most fundamental attribute of the American masculine experience and as such redefines every aspect of the masculine identity which becomes alienated by forces out of its control. As a result, their autonomy and their masculine identity have been overtaken by a new cultural discourse which not only triggers their crisis but changes the dynamic in gender role. In this context, the dissolution of their identity opposes their wives' ability to maintain and even increase their agency and presupposes feminine emancipation.

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